The Abuses of Literacy

The Making of a Worker 'Basic Skills' Crisis in England and North America

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Submitted for the Degree of Ph.D.

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September, 1997

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements v
List of Figures vi
List of Abbreviations vii
Preface ix
Thesis Summary xxii

Chapter 1 **Introduction**
Background 1
Objectives of the Study 6
Central Argument of the Thesis 10
Focus of Study 18
Research Framework 23
The Research 26
Plan of Thesis 33

Part I: The 'Literacy' Context: Historical and Ideological

Chapter 2 **The Literacy Imperative**
A Code for Talking About the Working Class
Introduction 37
The Social Distribution of Literacy: the Historical Context 42
Nineteenth Century Literacy Campaigning 48
Nineteenth Century Roots of Current Literacy Ideology 55
A Literacy *Imperative* 62
The Ideology of Literacy: the Twentieth Century's Contribution 68
Conclusion 84

Part II: Constructing a 'Crisis' of Worker Literacy

Chapter 3 **A Crisis of Worker Literacy**
The Making of an Issue in the 1980s
Introduction 87
American Literacy Campaigning in the 1980s 93
The Context for the Literacy Campaign: Educational Reform and Business Activism 100

Business Constructs a Literacy Campaign 105
The American Literacy Crisis Becomes a Workforce Literacy Crisis 116
Workforce Illiteracy Beyond the United States: the General Context 128
Canada: the American Campaign is Replicated 134
England: Workforce Illiteracy, a Construction of Educational Professionals 142
Conclusion 150

Chapter 4 **Embracing the Discourse of Worker Illiteracy The Response of Educationalists and Organized Labour**

Introduction 153
Workforce Illiteracy and the Discourse of the 'New Economy' 157
Workforce Illiteracy and the Educational Reform Context 167
Workforce Illiteracy/Workplace Literacy: the Response of Organized Labour 182
Conclusion 195

Chapter 5 **The Workforce Illiteracy Problem in Perspective A Critical Evaluation of the Evidence**

Introduction 198
The Workforce 'Illiteracy' Problem in Perspective:
Assessing the Claims 200
Portraying Illiterate Workers: Invoking the Image of the 'Primitive' 201
From Portraying to Quantifying: the 'Empirical' Evidence for Worker Illiteracy 207
The Evidence for Increasing Literacy Requirements of Work: a Case of Overqualification Rather than Illiteracy? 235
Demographic Shifts in the Labour Force: 'Illiteracy' or Discrimination? 248
Worker 'Illiteracy': a Question of Competency or Attitude? 254
Conclusion 258

Part III: The Impacts on Workers

Chapter 6 **Assessing the Impacts of Workplace Literacy Promotion on Workers: Opportunity or Threat?**

Introduction 260
Workforce Literacy Campaigns: the Roles of Capital and the State 262
Targeting Employers, Problematizing Workers 271
Problematizing Worker Basic Skills Competencies
General Impacts 279
Conclusion 300

Chapter 7 **Workplace Literacy Programmes The Promise Versus the Reality**

Introduction 303
Workplace Literacy Programmes
General Features 305
Workplace Literacy Programmes
Issues and Problems 328
Assessing the Potential of Workplace Literacy/Basic Skills Programmes: Conceiving Alternatives 352
Conclusion 382

Chapter 8 **Summary and Conclusions**

Introduction 386
The Critique of Workforce Literacy Campaigns 388
Rethinking the Issues 395

References 403

Acknowledgements

This thesis is a product of several years of research, interviews and discussions. I am indebted to the many people on both sides of the Atlantic who generously gave of their time and otherwise assisted me.

In Canada, I would particularly like to thank Joyce White and Philip McCann for their support. I am also especially grateful to all those who made my year of study and research in England so fruitful and so enjoyable. In particular, I would like to thank the National Union of Public Employees, the West Midlands Workers' Educational Association, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, Workbase Training, and the Centre for the Study of Education and Training at Lancaster University. I would especially like to thank John Field who so capably and enthusiastically helped me get started on my research in England.

My greatest debt of gratitude is to my supervisor, Helen Rainbird. Her interest and expertise, as well as her support and encouragement, have helped make it possible for me to complete what seemed at times an impossibly large task.

A particular thanks is also due to Helen Rainbird for suggesting the title for the thesis and for reading the numerous drafts, and to Anna Pollert for reading and advising me on the first completed draft.

I would also like to record my gratitude to the Warwick Business School Doctoral Programme Committee for granting me a generous Postgraduate Bursary for the years 1992-93 and 1993-94.

Finally, I would like to thank my companion, Jim Overton, whose personal support, tireless assistance and intellectual stimulation have contributed immeasurably to this study.

List of Figures

Figure 1

Existing Workplace Literacy Programmes: Primary Organizational Variables 311

Figure 2

Existing Workplace Literacy Programmes: Primary Programming Variables 312

Figure 3

National Trends in Workplace Literacy Programming: United States, England and Canada 316

List of Abbreviations

ABA	American Bar Association.
ABC	American Broadcasting Corporation.
ACTWU	Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union.
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations.
ALBSU	Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit.
ANPA	American Newspaper Publishers Association.
APL	Adult Performance Level.
AT&T	American Telephone and Telegraph.
BAS	British Association of Settlements.
BCEL	Business Council for Effective Literacy.
BEST	Basic Education for Skills Training.
BSAW	Basic Skills at Work.
CBI	Confederation of British Industry.
CBTFL	Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy.
CEO	Chief Executive Officer.
CJS	Canadian Jobs Strategy.
CLC	Canadian Labour Congress.
COHSE	Confederation of Health Service Employees.
CWA	Communications Workers of America.
CWE	Consortium for Worker Education.
DOL	Department of Labor.
ESL	English as a Second Language.
FE	Further Education.
GED	General Educational Development.
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey.
IBM	International Business Machines.
ILGWU	International Ladies Garment Workers' Union.
IMS	Institute of Manpower Studies.
JTPA	Job Training Partnership Act.
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress.
NALS	National Adult Literacy Study.
NLS	National Literacy Secretariat.
MCL	Movement for Canadian Literacy.
NBFL	New Brunswick Federation of Labour.
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees.
NWLP	National Workplace Literacy Program.
MSC	Manpower Services Commission.
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
OFL	Ontario Federation of Labour.

PBS	Public Broadcasting Service.
PLUS	Project Literacy U.S.
R2L	Return to Learn.
SEIU	Service Employees International Union.
TEC	Training and Enterprise Council.
TUC	Trades Union Congress.
UAW	United Auto Workers.
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
USDOE	United States Department of Education.
USDOL	United States Department of Labor.
WEA	Workers' Educational Association.
YTS	Youth Training Scheme.

Preface

I began working as an adult literacy teacher and programme organizer in Newfoundland, Canada in 1980. At that time, more than 20 percent of Canadian adults lacked high school graduation credentials; a significant proportion of them had attained only an elementary level of schooling or competency. In an age of escalating general educational achievement, anyone who had attained less than high school graduation was becoming increasingly disadvantaged in the labour market and marginalized in Canadian society. Those whose educational attainment or competency level was limited to that of elementary schooling were especially disadvantaged.

The Canadian government's national training programme, initiated in the 1960s, had recognized the need for educational upgrading opportunities for this section of the population and, by the mid-1970s, federal spending on adult basic education amounted to nearly 30 percent of the total spending on vocational education and training. By the time I became involved in adult literacy education in the early 1980s, however, federal spending had been reduced to a very small fraction of the mid-1970s levels; support for literacy level programmes had been virtually eliminated as early as 1978. The complete phase-out of federal funding for basic educational upgrading was being planned, though it would not be fully achieved for more than a decade.

The provincially funded programme I was hired to work in was a mere skeleton of the federally sponsored full-time programmes it was intended to replace. Classes were offered in the evenings only. Teachers were hired for five hours a week and, for the majority, the literacy programme represented only a small part of their work and professional commitments.

Within a few months, I came to realize that the programme I was involved in was too limited to offer any real opportunity for adults with literacy or numeracy difficulties to make any meaningful progress. Yet, even this marginal service was far from secure and, from the early 1980s, both teachers and students in our programme found themselves repeatedly engaged in efforts to curb tuition fee increases and programming cuts.

In 1981 I had joined the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL), an advocacy organization founded in the late 1970s, largely in response to the federal government's withdrawal of support for the adult literacy level of its basic education programmes. Though rather grand sounding, the Movement for Canadian Literacy was at that time little more than a handful of individuals involved in the already very marginalized adult basic education and English as a Second Language service. We were spread out across a vast country with no funding support, except that which we could individually coax out of our institutions. The objective of my advocacy work at the time—as well as that of the other members of the Movement for Canadian Literacy—was to secure an increased *public* commitment to the educational needs of the country's undereducated adult population.

It came as something of a surprise to those of us working in adult basic education and literacy advocacy when, in 1986—even as programmes continued to be eliminated—the federal government launched a national literacy initiative. And, although we would see little change in the provision of adult literacy and basic education programmes in the early days of the federal initiative, the situation began to change dramatically on other fronts. Suddenly, for example, there were funds for the Move-

ment for Canadian Literacy; this loose collection of individuals was transformed almost overnight into an organization with a national office and a board of more than twenty official 'representatives' of various organizations from every province and territory. National in-person meetings began to be held on a regular basis; and MCL now had a direct line of communication to the newly established National Literacy Secretariat in the federal Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship. But the composition of the MCL board had changed significantly and it was now far from clear what the objectives of the organization were.

Within a year of the launch of the federal literacy initiative, the issue of adult illiteracy seemed to be on everybody's mind. Newspapers carried stories on the subject virtually every day. Literacy 'coalitions' and 'networks' sprang up like mushrooms in one province after another. The federal literacy initiative had become a national literacy campaign. For those of us who had struggled for years to have the existence of undereducation even acknowledged, our initial reaction was predictably positive. Finally, it seemed that this social policy issue might receive the public attention and official notice it deserved. Many of us anticipated a reinstatement of federal funding for adult educational upgrading under the national training programme and a new commitment from our provincial governments to supplement the federal government's efforts.

It soon became clear, however, that whatever the newly launched Canadian literacy campaign was about, it was not about increasing opportunities for the undereducated in our public education and training systems. The planned phase-out of federally sponsored educational upgrading continued. And, although several provinces adopted

official positions and policies attesting to their commitment to adult literacy, in the case of my province as in that of many others, little would change in terms of access to programmes. In the public system, we were obliged to continue fighting programme cuts, teacher layoffs, and tuition fee increases even as the literacy campaign picked up momentum and support.

Educationalists were marginal to the national literacy campaign from its inception and, in many cases, they were explicitly excluded from official campaign activities—particularly if, as individuals, they were known to have a commitment to educational (and public) solutions to the 'problem'. I myself was excluded from literacy policy and advisory committees in my own province on the grounds that, as a literacy teacher and organizer, I had a 'vested interest'. The literacy committees and newly forming 'networks' and 'coalitions' in Newfoundland—as in the rest of the country—would be largely comprised of representatives of business, the media, volunteer organizations and state bureaucrats, all supposedly without 'vested interests'.

I would soon come to realize that literacy advocacy was not the simple 'good cause' I had enthusiastically supported—and even initiated—in the early years of the decade. The officially sanctioned national campaign was not promoting basic education as a right; literacy campaigners were not calling for increased public commitment to the needs of a significant under-served minority, as those involved in adult basic education had done in the early part of the decade. Indeed, the campaign was to a large extent based on the stigmatization of this minority. I knew that illiteracy (and, indeed, *undereducation* regardless of literacy competency) was already stigmatized in Canadian society. I could support a literacy campaign based on claiming a right to education for

all; I found myself much less enthusiastic about supporting a campaign which increased the stigmatization—evidenced in my own province, for example, by the use of such phrases as 'the enemy within' to describe the undereducated adult population.

The solutions advocated by the new literacy campaigners did not entail a considered public policy response but a hodgepodge of individual, charitable and corporate responses. Advocating for increased public commitment to the undereducated was increasingly treated as an outdated notion. The literacy campaign was changing the 'ideological landscape' to such an extent that lobbying against cuts to literacy programmes in the public educational and training system would no longer be endorsed by literacy advocacy organizations; and, indeed, the literacy organizations were themselves becoming more and more closely aligned with the governments which instituted the public sector cuts.

In early 1988, the Canadian literacy campaign took on a new twist when the recently established Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy (CBTFL) published a report claiming that adult illiteracy cost Canadian business and industry—and Canadian society—billions of dollars annually. Illiterate workers were said to be causing untold numbers of workplace accidents as well as slowing productivity and hindering the competitiveness of Canadian industry in the global marketplace. The report was self-admittedly non-empirical. The claims of illiteracy's aggregate societal costs were based on nothing more than estimates extrapolated from decades old American human capital projections of lifetime earnings differentials between those with high school graduation and those without. The claims about illiteracy and workplace safety were not supported by evidence of any kind; nor were claims about illiteracy and reduced

productivity. Yet the CBTFL report was uncritically accepted and aggressively promoted by the media, government officials and many in both the education field and the labour movement. For many involved in adult basic education provision, it was welcomed for the renewed attention it brought to the issue; indeed, many thought that it was particularly welcome because it would bring the especially influential business lobby on side.

I myself was sceptical of the value of the CBTFL report from its launch. Over nearly a decade of working in the field, I had come to know many adults who would be included among the Business Task Force report's 'illiterate'. Many of them held responsible jobs in which they were evidently quite successful and were taking on the additional commitment of evening classes in order to improve their personal and occupational opportunities. It seemed neither accurate nor fair to portray them *en masse* as a social and economic burden.

Within two weeks of the publication of the CBTFL report, my reservations about its value were more than confirmed when I came face to face with someone whom I recognized to be one of its victims. He was an applicant to the night school programme which I coordinated. He had come to the programme because an employer, in the wake of the publicity around the CBTFL report, had begun to administer impromptu 'literacy tests' to job applicants. Although this man had had years of experience as a building superintendent in Toronto and was now applying for a much less skilled job as a floor refinisher in his home town of St. John's, the employer had decided a literacy test was in order. He demanded that the applicant read the instructions on a can of floor varnish before the scheduled interview went ahead. The

applicant, though relatively competent in reading, had 'failed' the test—not surprising in view of the stressful circumstances, the surprise nature of the test, and the specialized nature of the reading task. On the basis of his performance, the interview was cancelled and he was not considered for the job. He came to the night school literacy class bewildered, humiliated and justifiably fearful for his and his family's future.

Shortly after, I was to meet another worker whom I also judged to be a victim of the new phase of the Canadian literacy campaign. He was a low level manager with the local telephone company—at that time within two to three years of retirement. He was brought to the adult literacy division of my college by the company's Director of Human Resources. In the light of the publicity about supposed work-related impacts of illiteracy, the Human Resources department had decided that this individual might improve his general performance with some literacy tuition. They were prepared to release him from work for a few hours a week to attend our programme. In the presence of the Human Resources Director, the man appeared to be enthusiastic about joining the programme, but as we got to know him, it soon became clear that he felt extremely threatened. He was ashamed to have been 'diagnosed' at his workplace as having literacy problems; he was embarrassed to be attending a literacy programme and was never able to establish a relationship with the other students. It also soon became evident that the literacy programme could do little in the time available to improve his literacy skills or, more specifically, to develop his 'report writing skills', which had been the particular objective defined for him by his employer. He had probably never done any appreciable amount of writing in his life and had obviously been hired and promoted on the basis of other skills; it seemed likely that he had some

degree of learning disability. Yet he was expected, at this late stage in his life and his career, to succeed where he had failed as a child and young adult; the circumstances (of his 'diagnosis' and referral) could not have been less favourable for such an outcome. In the event, he soon stopped coming to the class; we were not to learn what happened to him at his workplace.

From the time of the publication of the Business Task Force report, worker illiteracy became *the* central theme of the Canadian literacy campaign. The idea that there might be individuals in the Canadian workforce with less than fully developed literacy and language competencies was suddenly seen as totally unacceptable. That all jobs demanded the exercise of advanced literacy skills was a given; the proposition that workers with less than the most developed literacy competencies could be fully productive in any job was not up for discussion. It seemed clear to me that there was little in this new phase of the campaign which would benefit Canada's undereducated population; indeed, there was much that potentially threatened less formally qualified workers and, as the campaign progressed, my work continued to bring me face to face with the brutal reality of this.

During the 1980s, as I became increasingly alienated from the official literacy campaign, I had become more and more involved in my union and in the labour movement in general. From this perspective, I viewed the Canadian Business Task Force report on literacy—and the concentration on supposed worker illiteracy which it spurred—as a general attack on workers against which individual workers had little possibility of defense. I was troubled, as well as puzzled, to see that labour organizations and trades unions were, for the most part, endorsing the report. Indeed, in the

province of Ontario organized labour was an early advocate of the provision of so-called 'literacy' or 'basic skills' programmes in workplaces as a solution to the supposed crisis of worker literacy. Trades unions in that province were also among the pioneer deliverers of workplace 'basic skills' programs. Not only did this place unions in direct competition with the public deliverers of the adult literacy service at a time when that service was very much under threat; from my perspective at the time, it also involved them in a practice which was by no means a clear benefit to participating workers. In my experience as a literacy teacher and programme organizer, I had seldom encountered a worker who would have chosen to let his employer know that he was attending a literacy program; I had encountered many who actually feared that their employer would find out.

In undertaking the research for this thesis, it was my hope that I might contribute to a rethinking of Canadian unions' support of—and involvement in—the workforce literacy campaigns and workplace literacy programming by providing some analysis of the issues and problems raised by both. At the time of finishing the thesis, I have a somewhat different sense of the possibilities in this regard, however. The six years since I began my study have been a period of rapid change for vocational education and training in Canada. What I saw as a threat when I began this study in 1991 has become much more fully realized in the intervening period. The national vocational education and training system has been significantly reduced and much of the funding removed from the public system has been redirected to newly established private, for-profit training agencies, employers and employer groups, and so-called 'community' organizations. But a sizeable portion has also gone to trades unions and labour

organizations and joint labour/management initiatives. At a June 1997 national conference on training hosted by the Canadian Labour Congress it was quite clear that private sector unions (and at least one major public sector union) had sanctioned the privatization of vocational education and training, even if some were still prepared to denounce the public funding of private, for-profit training agencies. In the context of a broad-based approach to privatization which has seen the removal of education and training services from public institutions to a wide range of for-profit and not-for-profit providers, this must be seen as little more than lip service to anti-privatization. Indeed, for some union representatives attending the conference, even this lip service was not a given. In the session on 'basic skills', for example, the discussion leader—the education director of the Ontario Federation of Labour—felt it necessary to poll the participants as to whether there was agreement that the public system ought to be the primary provider of adult basic education. Several voices cried out in unison, "No, no, no!" The state/capital goal of privatization of the non-university post-secondary sector in Canada had, I realized in that moment, been largely achieved. Not only could we not expect the labour movement to effectively fight privatization; we could reasonably expect a significant proportion of trades unions (and labour federations) to fight *for* continued privatization.

My hope that an informed analysis might contribute directly to a rethinking of the Canadian labour movement's position on this issue has been somewhat dampened. There are, however, many who have begun to think critically about the issue and this was evidenced in the strong current of opposition to the general trend at the June 1997 conference. There is still room for a fruitful debate on the whole range of issues

raised by the workforce literacy issue and workplace literacy programmes; it is my hope that the analysis presented in this thesis might inform that debate and, thus, contribute to positive change.

ABOUT THE TITLE

Although I undertook the research for this thesis with a fairly well developed sense of the issues and problems surrounding the workforce literacy issue, the findings have, nevertheless, opened my eyes to many facets of the issue which I did not fully appreciate when I began the study in 1991. I have come to understand, for example, that what I had perceived as the literacy campaign 'getting away' on those of us involved in literacy advocacy was far from the reality. For although, as a close observer of the campaign, I was aware of both the strong business involvement and the clear American links, I was quite unaware of the fact that the campaign had actually been deliberately constructed by corporate interests for their own purposes. I was also unaware of the fact that what we saw as Canada's national literacy campaign was, in style and substance, an almost exact replication of the U.S. model.

I have also come to understand that what were presented (and perceived) as 'grass-roots' responses to a real social issue—literacy 'networks' and 'coalitions', for example—were not, as I had initially judged, simply misguided local or regional efforts. They were, in fact, direct United States 'exports' to Canada, in many cases funded by the same multinational corporations as had funded the development of the same types of efforts in that country. The principal results of such efforts—including the further stigmatization of undereducation and the effective removal of adult literacy education from the domain of public service—were not arbitrary; on the contrary, they

were inevitable outcomes of the populist structures supported by the state as well as the corporate sponsors of the national literacy campaigns in both the U.S. and Canada.

These discoveries led me to see more clearly the socially constructed nature of the 1980s adult literacy 'crisis' with which the public in both Canada and the United States were suddenly preoccupied, and the ways in which the very concept of literacy might be manipulated to serve particular (and not necessarily progressive) ends. My experience of living in England for the first year of my research served to underline the extent to which the North American adult literacy crisis had been constructed; for there, although the attainment of twelve years of formal education is far less common than in either the United States or Canada, there was no public sense of a crisis of adult literacy in the early 1990s.

The recent construction of a 'crisis' of worker literacy is one clear example of what I have termed here the 'abuses' of literacy. The obvious source for my title is Richard Hoggart's 1957 critique of English popular culture entitled *The Uses of Literacy*. Hoggart's work has enjoyed a long period of influence, though for many the title itself may be its main legacy. Remarkably, *The Uses of Literacy* does not actually address the question of literacy directly, though its central concern is with the way in which popular culture (including literary culture) may work to effect a class domination even stronger than direct economic domination. This idea—expressed here both more generally and more explicitly as the *hegemonic* functions of literacy—is a starting point for my study. Unlike Hoggart's work, however, this thesis engages directly with the question of literacy, understood as the ability to read and write; the 'abuses' of literacy

in my title refers literally to the use of the concept (as well as the normative expectation) of literacy not to empower, but to scapegoat and exclude.

Thesis Summary

Over the past two decades there has emerged a generalized critique of the quality of the labour supply in industrialized countries in relation to concerns about corporate profitability and national competitiveness. Frequently, the critique has focused, in whole or in part, on the so-called 'literacy' or 'basic skills' competencies of workers. This thesis examines the problematizing of workers' literacy competencies at a time when general educational attainments in Western countries have reached unprecedentedly high levels.

Both broad-based and historically informed, the study focuses on the United States, Canada and England over the period of the mid-1980s through the early 1990s. The motives of the agencies and interests which have proclaimed a worker 'basic skills crisis', as well as the processes through which their claims have been disseminated, are analyzed. The ideological and material contexts in which these claims have resonated are described.

The thesis concludes that the workforce basic skills 'crisis' is a *socially constructed* one which has little or no basis in fact. It is an issue which has had utility for a number of interests (including business, labour, educationalists and the state sector), however, and this, it is argued, accounts for the role they have taken in its social construction.

The evidence presented here establishes that the workforce literacy issue has had real consequences for workers. It has operated to scapegoat sections of the working class and to further marginalize less formally qualified workers in their workplaces and in the labour market. This—the industrial relations context in which the putative workforce 'basic skills crisis' has operated—forms the principal focus of the thesis. The impacts on workers of actions stemming from the acceptance of the idea of a basic skills crisis—including increasing scrutiny of literacy and language competencies of workers and the promotion and establishment of 'basic skills' programmes of questionable value in workplaces—ought to give cause for many who have endorsed claims of a 'crisis' and embraced workplace literacy to re-evaluate their position.

Chapter 1

Introduction

BACKGROUND

By 1987 the movement to reform education in the United States had focused its attention squarely on the supposed impacts of education on the national economy and the role of the present (allegedly poorly educated) workforce in America's fall from global pre-eminence. The position was stated most succinctly in a report entitled *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers in the 21st Century*, prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor by the conservative think tank, the Hudson Institute: "Unconstrained by shortages of competent, well-educated workers", the report asserted, "American industry would be able to expand and develop as rapidly as world markets would allow. Boosted by the productivity of [a] well-qualified workforce, U.S.-based companies would reassert historic American leadership in old and new industries, and American workers would enjoy the rising standards of living they enjoyed in the 1950s and 1960s" (Johnston and Packer, 1987:116). *Workforce 2000* was a media hit in the United States; the 'crisis' it foretold was featured on the covers of all the nation's major newspapers and magazines.

The report's impact on the re-emerging adult literacy 'crisis' in the United States would be instantaneous. An adult literacy representative of the state of Massachusetts described the impact in these terms: "For the first time, the issue of the need of adults for more education was not defined as a social justice issue, something that do-gooders and philanthropists concerned themselves with, but as an issue directly related to our national economic competitiveness. This was serious business; if solving the literacy

problem was a key to improving national productivity, then it demanded the attention of state and national leaders, and the development of an integrated policy response" (Stein, undated:8). The *Workforce 2000* report would lend both credibility and support to the process of transforming America's recurrent 'crisis' of adult illiteracy into a crisis of worker illiteracy—a process already well underway in Massachusetts and, indeed, in most of the country in 1987.

The 'crisis' of worker illiteracy would spill outside the borders of the United States as well. In Canada, two highly publicized surveys in this period reported that illiteracy among workers cost the country's industries billions of dollars annually (Creative Research Group, 1987; CBTFL, 1988a). The Government of the Province of Ontario, in a document entitled *Literacy: The basics of growth*, would define literacy as "... an economic imperative, not a privilege or luxury" (Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, undated*a*:3). The report declared: "Our ability to compete with our trade and industrial rivals is seriously compromised if the literacy and educational attainment of our workers is not brought closer to the standard of the rest of industrial nations. For example, 95% of Japanese workers have the equivalent of two years of education at an American college. Sweden, which competes with Canada in several industries, boasts a functional literacy rate of 92%, compared with Canada's rate of 83% ..." (ibid:7).

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) would follow the North American trend in its 1992 publication, *Adult Illiteracy and Economic Performance*, addressing the issue of putative literacy problems among workers in OECD countries. The report's starting position reflected the contemporary Canadian and American analyses. Literacy levels in the years ahead, it asserted, would be

"intrinsically ... tied to the capacity of firms and nations to respond to economic challenges..." (Benton and Noyelle, 1992:9).

In publications and reports such as these—of which there were literally hundreds produced in North America in the decade following *Workforce 2000*—literacy levels of the workforce (and education levels more generally) have been not only credited with determining the ability of nations to compete in the global economy; they have also been used, in crude applications of human capital theory, to rationalize falling wages and benefits within nations. In the United States, for example, putative worker illiteracy has provided a 'natural' explanation for the dramatic decline in wages and fall in living standards experienced by the majority of the American workforce over the past two decades. In a critique of U.S. corporations' failure to provide training for their workforces, Robert Reich, who would become the Secretary of Labor in the first term of the Clinton administration, wrote: "Over the last fifteen years American corporations have remained as competitive as ever. Their share of global exports has not significantly changed from what it was during the Carter years. The same cannot, however, be said of the competitiveness of the American work force. Today one out of five American eighteen-year-olds is functionally illiterate, and the real wages of nonsupervisory workers (about two-thirds of all wage earners) have plummeted 12 percent, putting them back where they were in the late 1950s after we adjust for inflation" (Reich, 1992:42).

In both Canada and the United States, estimates of wages forfeited by workers, whose low levels of education are assumed to have compelled employers to pay them less than they otherwise would, have been figured into the total costs of illiteracy to

society. The Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy (1988a), for example, estimated that $8.8 billion were lost to the Canadian economy annually through workers' failure to qualify for higher wages. And, in the United States, Jonathan Kozol, in his influential polemic, *Illiterate America* (1983) called for an updating of an earlier estimate tagging lost lifetime earnings of men with less than high school education at $237 billion. Indeed, this figure (though still not updated) would be cited nearly a decade later in a study of worker literacy commissioned by the British Employment Department (Atkinson and Papworth, 1991:4).

The late 1980s saw governments in both the United States and Canada actively promoting workplace literacy programmes, ostensibly in response to pressing needs as evidenced in a plethora of studies, surveys and reports. In the United States, the federal Department of Education initiated a National Workplace Literacy Program which, from 1988, funded 'demonstration projects' across the nation in workplace literacy or, as it would increasingly come to be called, 'basic skills'. In addition, many American states appropriated their own funding for the establishment of workplace literacy programmes. The Canadian federal government, following the U.S. example, made a concerted effort to stimulate private sector interest in the issue of worker literacy. Federal funds were contributed for the formation of a national 'business task force' on literacy which, in 1986, received additional federal funding to determine the costs of illiteracy to Canadian industry (CBTFL, 1988a). A national survey of workplace literacy programmes was sponsored by the federal government in 1990 (Johnston, 1991). Numerous provincial and regional workplace literacy conferences have been supported in the period since 1987; and a wide range of 'demonstra-

tion' workplace literacy programmes have been fully or partially funded by the state at both the provincial and federal levels.

In England, the central government agency for literacy, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit[1] (ALBSU), adopted "literacy at work" as one of two special initiatives to mark the United Nations-designated International Literacy Year in 1990. A number of local 'demonstration' projects in workplace literacy were funded through the 1990 initiative. And, following the Canadian and American examples, ALBSU (with support from the Employment Department) also commissioned a survey of employers in 1990 aimed at determining the costs of "poor basic skills" to business and industry in the United Kingdom (Kempa, 1993). The survey report concluded that worker basic skills deficiencies cost U.K. industries 4.8 billion pounds annually. In the same period, the Employment Service sponsored a study on the "written communication barriers" to employment (Hamilton and Davies, 1990) and the Employment Department commissioned the Institute of Manpower Studies to look at the reading and writing requirements of relatively unskilled jobs (Atkinson and Papworth, 1991). In 1991 a national Basic Skills at Work Initiative allocated funding for 30 pilot workplace literacy projects over three years through Training and Enterprise Councils (Tuckett, 1991).

In Canada and the United States, the major trades union federations—the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)—and many of their affiliates have been participants in the public discourse on workforce illiteracy and have largely concurred with public policy

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[1] Following a 1994 government review, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit was renamed The Basic Skills Agency. For the purposes of consistency, however, references to England's central literacy agency throughout this thesis will use the name by which it was identified from 1980 to 1995, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU).

makers and business and industry interest groups on both the existence of the problem and the kinds of interventions which can appropriately address it (see, for example, Turk and Unda, 1991; Sarmiento and Kay, 1990). In both countries, trades unions have also developed and operated workplace literacy programmes both independently and as participants with employer representatives on programme management boards. Although labour has had less of a public role in the worker literacy issue in England, the principal deliverer of workplace literacy programmes in that country, Workbase Training, has had the support of the Trades Union Congress, as well as several member unions, from its inception as a project of the National Union of Public Employees in 1978.[2]

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Over the last decade, there has developed a broad consensus around the 'fact' of workforce illiteracy as well as around workplace literacy programmes as the intervention of choice. Although trades unions and their federations are sometimes critical of particular practices in non-union run programmes, they are largely supportive of the notion of literacy and basic skills programmes being specifically tailored to the needs of particular groupings of workers (Turk and Unda, 1991; Sarmiento and Kay, 1990; Bonnerjea, 1987, 1990). Educationalists, likewise, while sometimes critical of the curricula and organization of workplace literacy programmes, have on the whole

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[2] Workbase started as the NUPE Basic Skills Project at the London Division of the National Union of Public Employees in 1978. In 1983 it became an independent organization, expanded its management committee to include three other manual worker trades unions—the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE), the General Municipal Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union (GMB) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU)—and changed its name to Workbase (Bonnerjea, 1987). Since the late 1980s, the agency has been known as Workbase Training. For consistency, it will be referred to as Workbase Training throughout this thesis.

embraced the workplace as a new frontier for the development of 'relevant' adult education (Stein, undated; Taylor, Lewe and Draper, 1991; Mace, 1992).

The primary objective of this study is to examine this consensus in order to understand, firstly, how substantial agreement on such a potentially contested issue has been reached and, secondly, what the implications of this consensus have been for workers—in their workplaces as well as in the labour market. The thesis is that, although the lack of educational credentials and other formal qualifications present real problems in terms of access to employment for a significant proportion of the working class in industrialized countries, these problems are not the primary focus of the current concern with workforce illiteracy; nor has the focus on illiteracy given rise to either policies or programmes which would alleviate such problems. On the contrary, interpreting the economic problems of either the nation or the firm as problems resulting primarily from the inadequacy of the labour supply may have several potentially negative consequences for workers at the level of the workplace and the labour market as well as at the wider level of social and economic policy.

One of the key questions addressed here is that of how workforce 'illiteracy' has come to be defined as a significant contributor to national economic disadvantage at a time when the workforces in question are arguably more 'literate' than they have been at any time in the past. Labour force surveys, school completion rates and post-secondary enrolments all point to increasing general levels of education among the workforces of western industrialized countries (Rumberger, 1981, 1984; Livingstone, 1996; Brown, 1994, 1995). When this is combined with continuing high levels of unemployment in the majority of these countries, an oversupply of educationally

qualified workers is indicated (ibid). Furthermore, public policies which have tended to move away from planning and maintaining a training infrastructure and towards market-driven training provided by employers on an *ad hoc* basis, (Keep and Mayhew, 1988; Keep, 1993; Smith and Smith, 1991) and capital's low level of investment in training for the majority of workers (Reich, 1992; Finegold and Soskice, 1990) would appear to indicate little perceived need on the part of either the state or capital for improvements in the quality of the workforce.

A second area of enquiry, central to this thesis, relates to the role of both education-alists and organized labour in the process of 'consensus building' around the issue of worker illiteracy. Adult educationalists have been among the principal promoters of the practice of locating adult literacy education in workplaces; indeed, in England, their role in both creating an issue of worker illiteracy and promoting workplace literacy programmes has been *the* central one. This thesis examines the participation of educationalists in a process which has arguably compromised both the independence and the integrity of the educational endeavour and which has furthered the privatization of adult basic education on both sides of the Atlantic.

This thesis also seeks to understand how labour organizations and trades unions have concurred—at least implicitly—with an analysis which blames workers' illiteracy for a range of problems (including, for example, workplace accident and injury, poor product quality, and low productivity) for which unions typically present alternate explanations. In England, trades unions lent crucial support to the (admittedly low key) promotion of workplace literacy programmes from the early 1980s. And, though they have remained substantially in the background, their role has continued to be an

important one—at least until the entry of Training and Enterprise Councils into the promotion of workplace literacy programmes in more recent years. In both Canada and the United States, organized labour has gone much further in its support of the workforce literacy campaigns and the promotion of workplace literacy programmes than have the British trades unions. For, not only are they very much a part of the public campaigns—campaigns which essentially problematize the working class; but they have also become centrally involved in the actual organization and delivery of workplace literacy programmes. In this role, they have worked directly to persuade employers that their members have literacy difficulties; and, through the example of the programmes they deliver, they have played a role in establishing the terms and conditions under which workers participate—terms and conditions which, as this thesis documents, are frequently sub-standard.

A third area of enquiry relates to the apparently contradictory role of the state with respect to the issue of worker literacy. For, even as officials and state representatives declaim the quality of national workforces and sponsor studies to demonstrate the crippling economic impacts of worker illiteracy, the state is at the same time in each case engaged in the systematic reduction of opportunities for meaningful skill acquisition (Finn, 1987; Shilling, 1989; Brown, 1991). Current claims about shortages of skilled workers, and about inadequacies in workforce preparation in general, are remarkably similar to claims made in the 1960s (Rainbird, 1990). Then, as now, concern was expressed about the impact of demographic shifts on skill supply and skill formation in the context of technologically-driven increasing skill requirements of work. As Rainbird points out, however, today those concerns are expressed in a

radically changed political and economic climate. Whereas, in the 1960s, the concerns fuelled demands for the expansion of secondary and post-secondary education and were met by public policies to achieve this, as well as by policies for the funding and regulation of training programmes, 1980s and 1990s concerns are expressed in a climate of cutbacks and retrenchment. In Britain, Canada and the United States, the trend has been for the state to withdraw from an active role in the structures which regulate the supply of training. Many of the structures which did exist for both the regulation and the provision of a supply of skilled workers (apprenticeship programmes and post-secondary vocational training, for example) have been replaced by *ad hoc* approaches largely controlled by employers. National training programmes have been supplanted in large measure by wage subsidization and social and 'life skills' programmes, of which the British Youth Training/Employment Training programmes, the Canadian Jobs Strategy programme, and the American Job Training Partnership Act programmes are prime examples.

Central Argument of the Thesis

The central argument of this thesis is that the current recognition of a widespread problem of worker illiteracy in North America has not arisen naturally in response to a growing and manifest problem. Rather, it has needed to be 'socially constructed' (see Schneider and Kitsuse, 1984; Gusfield, 1989). The social construction of a workforce illiteracy issue has gained much of its force from its use of the concept of 'literacy', a concept which draws on a deep reservoir of meanings and connotations. Claims for the benefits of literacy have taken on the force of mythology in western industrialized countries. Literacy is credited, in no clearly defined way, with individual and collec-

tive human development and material progress (Graff, 1979, 1987; Olson, 1990). 'Great Divide' theorists have presented the literate/illiterate dichotomy as an alternative to the now discredited primitive/civilized divide (see, for example, Goody, 1968). Literacy, in this interpretation, constitutes a set of skills and attributes which distinguishes the 'civilized' from the 'primitive' person through its supposed power to engender abstract thought and to enable complex problem solving. Human capital theory (Schultz, 1961, 1977) has invested in literacy the power to improve human productivity incrementally at both the individual and the aggregate level, and has defined the threshold levels of literacy among populations necessary for national economic development and modernization (Anderson, 1966; Blaug, 1966).

It is argued here that, though little more than mythologies, these ideas and theories have supported particular uses of the concept of literacy as a yardstick for purposes of selection and screening. The 'literacy yardstick' is one which is able to draw on the power of the mythologies surrounding literacy but which remains an amorphous concept, infinitely capable of being shaped to meet the needs of the measurers and selectors. Attempts to define and measure literacy have been driven in many instances by the objective of screening and selecting, as a means of controlling access—to immigration, the franchise, the military, and employment, for example. This thesis documents the trend in the late twentieth century to redefine 'literacy' (and, thus, the conditions of access) substantially upward, most notably in North America.

Participants in the 'social construction' of a problem of workforce illiteracy have included state agencies and elected officials, the public relations arm of the corporate sector, trades union leaders, and the adult education/literacy advocacy sector. Although

the various participants have made and/or supported claims of worker illiteracy for varying and sometimes radically different reasons, there has been virtually no public disagreement over either the magnitude or the nature of the 'problem'.

In both North America and England, the state has played an important role in the creation of the workforce illiteracy issue. The empirical basis for claims of widespread worker illiteracy has been provided in all three countries primarily by research sponsored either directly or indirectly by the state (see, for example, DesLauriers, 1990; Kempa, 1993). In North America, state agencies have also played a major supporting role in initiating and sustaining the 'public awareness' efforts which have been central to the creation of a sense of crisis. As this thesis documents, however, the central player in the North American campaigns to create a public issue of worker illiteracy has been the lobbying and public relations arm of the corporate sector. Corporate involvement in the issue, it is argued here, has been primarily driven by strategic objectives, both ideological and material. Widespread worker illiteracy has provided 'evidence' that the public education system is not working, thus supporting capital's renewed political project to reform public education in its own interests. The broad critique of workers' literacy or 'basic skills' competencies has also supported the push for a redirection of funds from public education and training programs and agencies into employer-provided or employer-mediated training and wage subsidy and on-the-job training programs.

Defined as workforce 'illiteracy' and drawing on the language of literacy campaigns, the 'problem' has also provided the corporate sector with an avenue for its renewed philanthropic activities. Through actively campaigning for literacy or support-

ing campaigns through corporate donations, as well as through actually providing literacy programmes in some instances, business and industry are able to establish themselves in regions and communities, as well as at the national level, as good 'corporate citizens'. This status is pursued for its commercial advantage; but it is also seen as a means both to mask the negative impacts of neo-liberal economic strategies and to secure a generally supportive environment for the unfettered operation of capital. It is argued here that the corporate sector has appropriated the language of literacy advocacy and literacy campaigns as a part of its broad political project to extend corporate hegemony.

The adult education/literacy advocacy sector has provided a theoretical/definitional base for workplace literacy which draws on the entire western historical legacy of literacy. It is argued here, however, that adult educationalists and literacy advocacy groups have participated in the legitimation of a workforce illiteracy crisis and have argued for workplace literacy programmes largely as a pragmatic response to the failure of general literacy campaigns to achieve either policy or funding commitments from the state.

Though they have been less actively involved in creating the issue of worker 'illiteracy' than the other participant groups, trades unions' participation (and, in some cases, their silence) has been crucial to the success of the endeavour. The role of trades unions, like that of educationalists, has been ambivalent. It is suggested here that the weakening of unions in the current political and economic climate, and the attendant growth of the 'servicing' function of unions, accounts in large measure for the fundamentally favourable response of many unions and labour federations to this issue.

This thesis examines the ways in which these apparently disparate interests have worked together to create and sustain a 'moral panic' around the issue of workforce illiteracy in North America, and to support the increasing linking of adult literacy education to industry on both sides of the Atlantic. Examination of the 'evidence' which has been collected to support the claims of worker illiteracy reveals that the claims for a crisis of illiteracy among workers are generally based on little more than opinion surveys, ranging from business executives' opinions of shop floor literacy levels (CBTFL, 1988a; Omega Group, 1989; Kempa, 1993) to workers' opinions about the literacy of their fellow workers (reported in Ritts, 1986). Examination of the bases for claims that the need for literacy at work is steadily increasing reveals that such claims have little more basis in empirical research than the claims about worker illiteracy. The majority of such claims rest on the untested assumption that increased use of technology necessitates increasing levels of literacy on the part of the user. A survey of the literature on technology and skill finds little evidence to support an essentially positive link between increasing technology and increased use of literacy skills. On the contrary, it is as likely that technology will be used to remove the skill component from work, a process which has become known as 'deskilling', as it is that it will increase the skill (or the literacy) component (Braverman, 1974; Crompton and Jones, 1984). It is argued here that deskilling may be particularly likely to occur with the introduction of technology among the least formally educated sections of the workforce, as the evidence of the massive destruction of traditional blue collar jobs in manufacturing industry indicates. Claims for increasing need for literacy are also based on the assumption that the organization of workplaces is changing in ways which

increase worker autonomy and responsibility. This thesis examines the role of the notion of a new economy and a new work order—including, for example, concepts such as post-industrialism, post-Fordism, flexible specialization, and multi-skilling—in the creation of a worker illiteracy problem.

The images and language used to describe the alleged workforce illiteracy problem are of particular importance, as responses and solutions to a problem are largely shaped by the way in which that problem is defined. As this thesis documents, the images of worker illiteracy are highly emotive, with workers frequently presented as both pathetic and dangerous. Examples range from workers who devise elaborate strategies to hide their illiteracy and who shrink from challenge or promotion to those whose illiteracy causes appalling destruction of life and property (Kozol, 1985; Maynard, 1989). Negative images are found in material presented by all participants in the social construction of the issue, including trades unions (see, for example, New Brunswick Federation of Labour, undated). In many instances, what are clearly examples of 'urban myths' are presented as real examples of the problems caused by illiteracy in the workplace. This thesis explores the mythologizing of worker illiteracy and links it with the kinds of mythologizing which have historically characterized literacy promotion and campaigns. It is argued here that such portrayals are neither accurate nor helpful and that they function primarily to scapegoat those workers who are invariably the first victims of labour shedding industrial policies and practices.

The evidence described in this thesis suggests that recent workforce literacy campaigns have been largely rhetorical campaigns whose objectives have little or no relation to increasing educational opportunities for workers. Although business

interests are willing to participate in the rhetoric about a crisis of literacy and to promote literacy as a part of their philanthropic or advertising strategies, they have not exhibited a concomitant interest in either providing or supporting educational opportunities for their own workforces. And, while governments or state agencies have played a key role in creating a sense of critical workforce deficit, in all three countries state policies on workforce preparation continue the trend towards the deregulation and dismantling of existing systems. The research described here indicates that there are far fewer workplace literacy programmes in operation than either the claims about the extent of the problem or the rhetoric about public and corporate support would lead one to suppose. Where such programmes do exist, the circumstances under which they are established and the conditions under which they operate mean that the benefits which workers may derive from them are marginal at best; at their worst, they present a significant threat to workers' job security. It is important to note as well that industrial and public policies developed in response to the assumption of a problem in the workplace—or justified by the assumption of a problem—may affect many more workers than will ever be involved in workplace literacy programmes. For this reason, responses to the putative workforce illiteracy crisis, including workplace literacy programmes and related workplace practices, warrant serious attention. As this thesis documents, the workforce literacy campaigns have also either supported or directly promoted a range of social and labour market policies, the full impacts of which may not yet be fully appreciated.

As a study of the socially constructed nature of adult literacy 'crises' and campaigns—including the current manifestation of 'crisis' as widespread workforce illiter-

acy—this thesis breaks new ground. For, while the contexts and underlying agendas of 'crises' of school literacy have been well documented (see, for example, Shor, 1986; Simon, 1985; 1988; Wright, 1977), adult literacy crises and accompanying campaigns have generally been accepted at face value. Although some have been critical of the assumptions and beliefs about literacy which underpin such campaigns (Graff, 1987a; Street, 1984; Levine,1986) and others have provided critiques of particular aspects of campaigns[3], they have all generally failed to provide a critical account of the 'crises' themselves as purposely *constructed*. The question of why general complacency towards educational disparity at a particular time shifts to widespread public 'concern' and, through literacy campaigns, is transformed into a reforming zeal directed at the victims of that disparity is not generally asked. On the contrary, the majority of observers of literacy campaigns appear to assume the answer to be self-evident. It is assumed that literacy campaigns, however poorly organized, badly informed, mis-guided, or compromised, represent efforts to deal with a real or genuinely perceived problem in an essentially positive manner. That those campaigns tend to frame the 'problem' in such a way as to preclude solutions which either meet the immediate needs of undereducated adults or address the underlying issue of educational disparity is generally not recognized as an inherent feature of such campaigns but is, rather, interpreted as a failure of each campaign independently. This is evidenced in the fact that, in spite of the regularity with which literacy campaigns fail to achieve any meaningful change in either the provision of opportunities for undereducated adults or

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[3] Notably, the adoption of arbitrary criteria for literacy and the use of literacy 'tests', as well as the negative stereotyping of supposed illiterates (see, for example, Levine, 1982; Kazemek, 1985; Heap, 1990).

the inequitable distribution of educational resources, jurisdictions which have not mounted literacy campaigns are criticised for failing to do so (see, for example, Limage, 1993).

FOCUS OF STUDY

This examination of the issue of workforce illiteracy and its implications for workers focuses broadly on trends and practices in three countries—the United States, Canada and England. In a study such as this, it is important to look outside national boundaries if we are to appreciate that problems which have been constructed as 'national' problems, uniquely important to the survival or pre-eminence of a particular nation, may have had their genesis outside the nation. In the case of recent workforce illiteracy 'crises', this is particularly important, as what have been presented as peculiarly national problems may be seen in key respects to have been borrowed either whole or in part from another nation or nations. This thesis argues that such is the case with the supposed Canadian crisis of workforce literacy, for example, where there is clear evidence of a campaign directly borrowed from the United States. And, although the scale of campaigning and promotion aimed at creating a problem of worker illiteracy has been relatively much smaller in England, there is considerable evidence of direct borrowing of both claims and strategies from the North American campaigns.

Canadian, American and English workers might be forgiven for thinking that they are among the least prepared workers of all industrialized countries, even comparing poorly with some newly industrializing countries (Bengtsson, 1988). They are presented with this evidence through a range of media on a regular basis. Neither

group is to know that their 'competition', the workforces of other nations, are being told the same thing. Nor do they know how the diagnosis has been arrived at. Workforce illiteracy—and, in other contexts, skill shortages, skill mismatches, inflexibility—are presented as particular problems of each nation, problems which disadvantage that nation in relation to others. Only through examining the uses of the diagnosis and the rhetoric of relative national disadvantage across two or more countries, can we begin to appreciate the degree to which the diagnosis and acceptance of deficit may operate to discipline workforces.

When this study was conceived, it was anticipated that there would be general similarity between Canada and the United States in terms of the conduct of the workforce literacy campaigns and in respect of policy and programme responses. Given the presence of 'international' unions which organize workers in both countries and the widespread presence of American multinational companies operating in Canada, as well as the trans-border character of many industry associations, it could be expected that business and some union responses to the issue would be largely similar. Also, given the strong links between Canadian and American scholarship in the area of adult education and the presence of American voluntary literacy organizations essentially operating as 'branch plants' in Canada, a significant degree of trans-national influence and borrowing in this area was also anticipated. The fundamental similarity of state involvement in the issue and of public policy responses in the two countries was less anticipated.

England was selected for comparison with North America in anticipation of significant differences in a number of areas. It was expected that, in terms of the

actual development and delivery of programmes, there would be significantly more uniformity in England, given that country's unitary system for adult education. This was, in fact, found to be so. What was not anticipated was the virtual absence of rhetoric about workforce illiteracy outside the very narrow domain of adult education, and even there the issue has until relatively recently been confined to a comparatively small group. The workforce literacy campaigns which were in full swing in both Canada and the United States in 1991 simply had no parallel in England at that time, in spite of the fact that one distinct element of the context for such rhetoric in North America—a wide ranging attack on the education system—was very much in evidence in England in that period. And, like both Canada and the United States, England had had a long history of locating much of the blame for industrial problems and long-term economic decline with its workforce (Nichols, 1986; Cutler, 1992).

Although it may be impossible to identify precisely the reasons for the absence of a broad-based literacy campaign in England paralleling the recent campaigns in North America, this thesis suggests a number of factors which may account for the difference. It is proposed, for example, that differences in the historical development of mass education and differing normed expectations of education may, in part, account for such difference. Variations in the capital/state relationship arising from differing political structures may also account, in part, for the difference. The increased role of lobbying in a federal political structure, it is argued here, has presented enhanced opportunities for 'business activism' in North America—a trend which has been directly responsible for the renewed period of literacy campaigning in both Canada and the United States.

Although this study examines the issue of workforce illiteracy and responses to it in the light of events, policies and practices in three countries, it is not a strict comparative study. Such a study would have entailed a more in-depth analysis of the political and structural backgrounds to the issue in each country than is provided here. Differences in educational legacies as well as in systems of education and training are central to current differences in national manifestations of concern about illiteracy. Differences in industrial relations systems, as well as in general expectations of employment and social mobility, affect the ways in which analyses of workforce deficit are formulated. Differences in political structures, including processes for popular participation and 'consensus building', are central to the development, the naming and the resolution of 'public issues'. There are, in each of these areas, significant differences among all three countries looked at in this study. Indeed, *within* each of the countries in question there are important differences in many of these areas. This is particularly true of both the United States and Canada where both geography and federal systems of government magnify the kinds of regional variations found even in a country as geographically compact and relatively centrally governed as Britain. It is difficult to make general statements about either country without, to some extent, glossing over important tensions, contradictions and differences. This problem is exacerbated when comparisons and generalizations across nations are attempted. If these limitations are borne in mind, however, the value of this research as a broad study of general trends and key similarities and differences in the development of the issue may be recognized.

It is perhaps worth noting that the three countries which have formed the focus of this study share a dominant linguistic and cultural makeup. There is no apparent basis, however, for drawing conclusions from this about similarities in the current distribution of literacy or the actual incidence of adult/worker illiteracy. As already noted, and as Chapter 2 discusses more fully, there have been important historical differences between England and North America in respect of the development of mass schooling and the diffusion of literacy; both Canada and the United States have among the highest levels of general educational attainment in the world and, in this respect, have more in common with several continental European countries than with England (Green, 1990; 1991a). Yet, while the "Anglo" factor may not hold any explanatory power in terms of adult/worker illiteracy as an actual problem, long standing political associations between the three countries do provide some explanation for the transference of ideas and policies described here. In the arena of educational and training policy, in particular, the last two decades have seen considerable parallel developments in Canada, the United States and England. Although each country started from a different place—Canada, for example, had developed a legislative framework and a coherent national system for vocational education and training—all three have favoured market-driven policies to a greater or lesser extent since the mid 1970s. As this thesis documents, the withdrawal of the state from a coordinating role in the provision of vocational education and training and the increased privileging of capital's role in that process may be the most significant common context in respect of the 'worker literacy' issue in the three countries.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This study fits within the broad framework of industrial relations, understood, in the sense articulated by Hyman (1975), as the *processes of control over work relations*. Hyman proposed a focus for industrial relations which could take into account the 'problems and aspirations' of workers in terms not confined to the study of organizational behaviour, including that of trades unions. In doing so, he put forward an alternative to what he identified as having been the mainstream approach to industrial relations in Britain until the late 1960s, an approach which many would argue continues to define the discipline in North America today. This approach defines the discipline of industrial relations narrowly and conservatively in terms of the 'study of institutions of job regulation' (Flanders, 1965, quoted in Hyman, 1975:11). As Hyman's critique of this approach notes, defining industrial relations solely in terms of rules and regulations is both restrictive and evaluative. "The implication is that what industrial relations is all about is the maintenance of stability and regularity in industry. The focus is on how any conflict is contained and controlled, rather than on the processes through which disagreements and disputes are generated. From this perspective, the question whether the existing structure of ownership and control in industry is an inevitable source of conflict is dismissed as external to the study of industrial relations—which must be concerned solely with how employers, trades unions and other institutions cope with such conflict" (1975:11).

Hyman articulated the need for a broader and more radical definition of the subject. The narrow view of industrial relations as the study of 'institutions of job regulation' is unsatisfactory, he argued, in part because it "diverts attention from the structures of

power and interests, and the economic, technological and political dynamics, of the broader society—factors which inevitably shape the character of relations between employers, workers and their organisations" (ibid:31). To provide concrete information about the character of industrial relations, it is necessary, Hyman suggests "to add information about the context of work and industry". In Western Europe and North America the main feature of this context—the "crucial fact" influencing industrial relations—is the "capitalist character" of the economies (ibid:19). "This means that much of the productive system is privately owned, with ownership concentrated in a very small number of hands; that profit—the pursuit of economic returns to the owners—is the key influence on company policy; and that control over production is enforced *downwards* by the owners' managerial agents and functionaries" (ibid, emphasis in original). It also means that "labour is treated as a commodity" and workers are treated as 'factors of production'; "Their upbringing and education is often devoted primarily to rendering them in some narrow respect useful to an employer" (ibid:20).

In this context—the context for all industrial relations in capitalist economies—employers/capitalists will have an interest not only in relations with their current workforces but with the condition of the labour market in general. They will have an interest in the relative valuing of knowledge and skills as well as in their distribution, as both will affect the bargaining power of workers. For this reason, the processes through which skills and knowledge are accorded more or less value and through which workers gain access to knowledge and skills are processes over which capital will seek to have influence. Systems and institutions which condition the labour force

(including systems for regulating and providing training and education) are, from this perspective, very much a part of the context for industrial relations.

This study approaches the issue of workforce illiteracy within the broad perspective suggested by Hyman and widely practised within the study of industrial relations in Britain today. It does so by looking at the 'structures of power and interests' behind the construction of the 'problem' of worker illiteracy and by examining both the 'problem' and its 'solutions' in terms of their relation to the politics and dynamics of the workplace as well as of the external environment. The widespread diagnosis of worker illiteracy has given rise to workplace and labour market practices which have clear and definable impacts on the 'problems and aspirations' of workers. But the range of knowledge and skills subsumed under 'literacy' in current workforce literacy discourse also places the issue firmly within the context of struggles over the defini-tion and valuing of workers' knowledge and skills and integrally links it to the struggle over both the organisation and the content of public education and training systems and the extent to which those serve to advantage either labour or capital.

The research documents policies and practices relating to workplace literacy which affect workers in their workplaces; it also focuses on aspects of the issue relating to labour markets generally, including those relating to skill, education and training. These are conceived of as not separate from, but a fundamental part of 'industrial relations'. The degree to which either capital or labour influences or controls the systems of education and training, the relationship between the organisation and content of education and training and the worker's capacity to use those to his/her advantage, the degree to which skills are defined and attained in ways which enable

workers to 'own' and to 'sell' them or, conversely, which render them relatively 'unsaleable'—all of these issues directly affect the experience and aspirations of workers. All in this sense are constituents of industrial relations.

THE RESEARCH

As already noted, the principal aim of this study is to provide a critical analysis of the social construction of a crisis of worker illiteracy. In researching the subject, I set out first of all to understand the process through which worker illiteracy had come to be defined as a problem in the late twentieth century. My second objective in undertaking the study was to assess the impacts of both the diagnosis of illiteracy, and the promotion and establishment of workplace literacy programmes, on workers in their workplaces as well as in the labour market. The identification of these two broad areas of enquiry, and the particular way in which the questions relating to each area of enquiry were framed, grew out of my experience in both adult literacy education and organized labour. Given the trans-national focus of this study and the nature of the research objectives, the research has necessarily been both broad-based and historically informed.

For all three countries, the research with respect to the material and ideological contexts in which workforce illiteracy has become a public issue and workplace literacy programmes have been promoted has been pursued similarly. In terms of researching the *making of the issue*, for example, this has involved surveys and analyses of media coverage of the issue; analyses of primary documents including the surveys and tests which constitute the empirical evidence for the 'crisis'; surveys and analyses of trades union and labour organization policies on literacy and workplace

literacy as well as on skills, training and education; analyses of public policy documents specifically focused on workforce literacy as well as those which invoke worker illiteracy as a part of their rationale, recommendations and conclusions; analyses of labour market surveys and reports; and analyses of official studies and reports on education and training.

Although I began my study of the workforce/workplace literacy issue very much focused on the 'here and now' of the late twentieth century, it soon became apparent that an adequate treatment of many of the fundamental questions must include the historical dimension. Much of the analysis which informs claims that literacy is in crisis in industrialized countries, as well as much of the rhetoric of modern literacy campaigns, rests on a set of beliefs and assumptions about the history of Western literacy—assumption and beliefs which, though rarely articulated and even more rarely subjected to critical scrutiny, have attained the status of self-evident truths. For this reason, any examination of the current literacy crises and campaigns must properly begin with an examination of the historical record. A review of the critical literature on the institution of mass education in the nineteenth century and the development over the following century of a 'literacy imperative', for example, establishes the groundwork for understanding the potentially manipulative uses of literacy crises and campaigns and the hegemonic functions of the very concept of literacy.

The principal formal research on *workplace literacy policies and practices* was conducted from 1991 to 1994, but my interest in the issue—and my informal research—had actually started several years earlier. In the course of my professional and voluntary activities, I had been talking to people involved in promoting and

delivering workplace literacy from at least 1987. I had also been collecting relevant documents—primarily from the United States and Canada, but also from England.

A central goal of this component of the research was to complete and systematize the collection of documents in order that a broad survey could be completed, utilizing as extensive a portion of the available documentary sources as possible. Other field research activities (including, for example, direct observation of programmes and informal interviews and discussions with the full range of participants in the campaigns and in the promotion and delivery of programmes) were undertaken primarily as a means of enabling a more informed 'reading' and analysis of the documentary evidence. This was especially necessary as most of the documentation on the workforce literacy issue is, in fact, primary source material. The majority of programme descriptions, for example, are contained in reports intended for submission to sponsors or funding agencies; conferences and other meetings, from which reports have been published, have been primarily campaign and promotional events; the majority of surveys and general reports have been sponsored by the state agencies which are charged with promoting the expansion of workplace literacy programmes. So, while such documents constitute virtually the only sources of information about both the promotion and provision of workplace literacy programmes, the information is necessarily biased. Their value as research sources is entirely dependent on the extent to which the reader is able to interpret critically the information provided, in the light of both a general knowledge of the field of study and an awareness of the particular function of the documents themselves.

Introduction

Prior to beginning the research for this study, I already possessed extensive firsthand knowledge of both practice and policy in adult literacy and basic education in Canada. I had visited literacy programmes in the majority of Canadian provinces and had been involved in numerous literacy initiatives and conferences at all levels. As a member of advocacy organisations, I had researched and authored policy documents at both the national and provincial levels. Through my work and, in particular, through my participation in regional, national and international conferences, I had actually witnessed the creation of the workforce literacy issue—propelled from a non-issue at the beginning of the 1980s to *the* literacy issue by the end of the decade, the sole focus of a growing proportion of literacy conferences and a priority target for state literacy funding at all levels. As a programme organizer in a public community college, I was involved just prior to and during the course of my research in aspects of workplace literacy in both public institutions and private industry. My involvement included developing proposals for state funding of both college and union workplace literacy programmes; negotiating with employers (public and private) for financial support for programmes; participating with employer and union representatives and, in some cases, with external workplace literacy 'experts' in determining workplace literacy needs, and planning for the promotion of programmes; participating in discussions with a national trades union on the development of a literacy policy; and organizing the development and delivery of a workplace literacy programme in a public institution and participating, with both employer and union representatives, in the management of that programme. The knowledge gained through this experience informed all aspects of the research undertaken for this study.

My experience as a teacher of adult literacy and English as a Second Language also prepared me well for the critical evaluation of the practice of workplace literacy, both as I observed programmes and as I reviewed documentation describing programmes. When I observed workplace literacy programmes in the English portion of the research, for example, I was able to judge the difficulty of programme materials and the range of reading (and writing) abilities of participants, given relatively brief exposure. I was also able to make judgements about methodological and pedagogical questions, including whether programme objectives and curricula were likely to result in meaningful changes in literacy abilities and, just as importantly, whether they would likely do so within the time available. I could also judge whether the materials which were used were appropriate to the reading levels of students/participants and whether students were experiencing frustration or not. From observation, casual conversation and informal interviews, I was able to determine whether worker participants understood both the objectives of the programme(s) and the consequences (whether positive, negative, or none) of participation. Similarly, when I reviewed documentation on workplace literacy programmes (including descriptive reports, curriculum guidelines, samples of teaching and learning materials, student assessment instruments, and so forth) I was able to bring to the analysis this same experience-based knowledge and judgement.

Although, as noted, I started the formal research period with a fairly comprehensive understanding of the Canadian dimension of the issues, I did undertake some additional research in Canada for this study. Formal visits to Canadian workplace literacy programmes as well as interviews with employers, union and labour federation representa-

tives, educationalists and worker participants, undertaken in the 1991-1994 period, enabled me both to fill in the gaps in my knowledge and to systematize the Canadian material.

The bulk of the English field research was conducted between the autumn of 1991 and the summer of 1992, a period during which I lived in that country. My objective in much of the English research was to gain a broad understanding of policy and practice relating to both adult literacy and basic education and workforce/workplace literacy. Given that England's educational system(s), including its adult education system, have little in common with North American models, a systematic study which included personal observation of programmes was essential. My initial questions were necessarily of a different order than those with which I approached the North American research. I needed to find out, for example, whether when we used similar terms to describe adult literacy (as a problem as well as a practice), we were in fact describing the same thing; whether the issue of adult illiteracy was similarly perceived and similarly addressed on both sides of the Atlantic; whether programmes designated 'literacy' and 'adult basic education' were targeted at similar levels of literacy competency or educational attainment; and whether programmes designated 'workplace literacy' or 'workplace basic skills' resembled programmes similarly designated in North America.

My investigation of these questions involved visits to a range of general adult literacy programmes and workplace literacy programmes. It also involved semi-structured interviews with employers and employer representatives; local and regional trades union representatives and representatives of national labour organizations; adult

education organizers and policy makers (national and regional); adult literacy teachers and students; and worker participants in a variety of educational programmes in both public institutions and private industry. I was a participant/observer in two very different models of worker 'basic skills' programmes, both involving public sector employees. I also attended conferences, workshops and information sessions involving educationalists, workers, trades union representatives and employer representatives, and I participated in collaborative efforts with a group of British academics conducting research on the subjects of worker education and workplace literacy.

The American research on workplace practices, primarily conducted in the period 1993 to 1995, largely relied on documents (both published and unpublished), although it also included some informal discussions with American educationalists and labour representatives. Relative to both Canada and England, workplace literacy in the United States has generated a substantial amount of descriptive documentation as well as some significant critical and analytical documentation. This has made it possible to construct a general outline of policies and practices in that country which otherwise would be a considerably larger task than it has been for either Canada or England. The United States has also generated the great bulk of primary materials relating to workplace literacy programming, ranging from curriculum materials and assessment tools, to job and worker 'literacy audit' materials, to programme promotional materials. Many of the American materials are widely used in workplace literacy programmes in Canada. For this reason, there is a great deal of overlap in Canadian and American research in workplace literacy. Although I did not visit American workplace literacy programmes in the course of this study, my work and research in Canadian workplace literacy

programmes provided exposure to a wide range of American workplace literacy materials.

PLAN OF THESIS

Part I of this thesis (Chapter 2) provides the basis for understanding the late twentieth century 'crisis' of worker literacy as a part of a political and ideological continuum spanning at least two centuries. The chapter locates current beliefs about the nature, power and role of literacy in the broad context of the historical uses and valuing of literacy. It situates the problematizing of working class literacy in the specific context of the nineteenth century promotion of public systems for mass education and presents a critical and revisionist history of the development of a 'literacy imperative'—an imperative, it is argued, which has been used selectively for more than a century to discriminate against sections of the working class.

Part II (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) examines the specific focus on worker illiteracy—or 'basic skills deficits'—in both North America and England in the current period. Chapter 3 locates the genesis of the current crisis of worker illiteracy in the United States in the decade beginning 1982-83. The chapter explores the central question of 'agency' in what it defines as a process of 'social construction'. It is argued that this most recent period of literacy campaigning in the United States has been propelled by business activism and strategic philanthropy—a fact which accounts, in large measure, for the strong focus on the economic impacts of literacy and the putative illiteracy of workers which that campaigning took. The ideological biases of the 1980s American campaign have similarly driven literacy campaigning in both England and Canada in this period.

Chapter 4 examines the ideological and material contexts in which claims of widespread worker illiteracy have been made and in which they have found general acceptance. Both the rhetoric of a 'new' economy and the changing nature of work, and the renewed emphasis on the human capital function of education in the context of a regressive educational reform movement, have created an environment in which claims of the inadequacy of current workforces and of the escalating need for literacy have rung true. The chapter examines, in particular, the role(s) of both educationalists and organized labour in the workforce literacy campaigns and workplace literacy promotion in the light of the prevailing ideologies and material conditions.

Chapter 5 examines in detail the claims of those who have promoted the idea that many workers' literacy competencies are inadequate for either their present jobs or for the work of the future. The anecdotal and 'empirical' evidence used to support the claims of widespread worker illiteracy is critically examined. It is argued that, though most such claims are generally accepted at face value, they are not supported by the evidence. It is further argued that current claims about the nature and extent of working class 'illiteracy' mark a fundamental continuity with the problematizing of the class which began in nineteenth century schools promotion and which has been reaffirmed in recurrent adult literacy campaigns throughout the twentieth century.

Part III (Chapters 6 and 7) examines the impacts (both probable and manifest) of the general problematizing of workers which has accompanied both the workforce literacy campaigns and the promotion of workplace literacy programmes over the past decade. The evidence presented in Chapter 6 (relating to the promotion of literacy or basic skill programmes in the workplace) challenges the idea that workers may benefit

from a recognition by employers of their supposed need for basic education. It is argued, on the contrary, that both the generalized and the targeted problematizing of sections of workforces in recent years have created an environment in which workers have been subjected to increased and unwarranted scrutiny; this has particularly disadvantaged the least formally qualified both in their workplaces and in the labour market.

Chapter 7 documents both the extent and the general characteristics of workplace programmes classed as literacy or basic skills in each of the three countries and provides a critical assessment of these programmes in terms of their value to the workers targeted. It also examines the role(s) of trades unions in such programmes and assesses the potential for organized labour to influence positive change.

Part I

The 'Literacy' Context: Historical and Ideological

Chapter 2

The Literacy Imperative
A Code for Talking about the Working Class

INTRODUCTION

Literacy promotion has been a ubiquitous feature of twentieth century life in both industrialized and 'developing' countries. In several industrialized countries residual 'pockets' of adult illiteracy—strongly associated with ethnicity and class—have been identified periodically throughout the twentieth century as barriers to the attainment of a full and mature democracy and as obstacles to the nation's achievement of its social and economic potential. Poverty and all its related impacts—whether resulting from unemployment and consequent dependency on the state or from low-wage work—are commonly attributed to relative lack of literacy skills (see, for example, Statistics Canada et al., 1996). Similarly in Third World countries, literacy is often held to be the only lasting solution to the full range of problems associated with underdevelopment—from poverty and related health problems, to foreign capitalist exploitation, to political oppression.[1] In these formulations, the role of literacy is, as Graff has noted, "central and deterministic" (1979:52).

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[1] In what may be one of the most extreme examples of this tendency, the Canadian Organization for Development through Education has run an advertisement for the past several years whose headline reads: "Most people think there's only one way to help the Third World. We have 26." Underneath a picture of a blackboard filled with the 26 letters of the alphabet, the text starts with the following: "You'd be amazed at what twenty-six letters can do for people in developing countries. They provide skills, health, nutrition, books, paper, dignity, knowledge, jobs, workshops, libraries. And that's only the start" (Alberta Teachers Association, 1990). An editorial in Canada's *Globe and Mail* (1995a), entitled "Literacy saves lives", began with: "When people are in danger of dying from malnutrition or tuberculosis or cholera, teaching them to read might seem a poor use of time. In fact, it is one of the best ways of keeping them alive...In general, the higher the rate of literacy—particularly female literacy—the lower the incidence of life-threatening health problems".

In the last half century, literacy has assumed a dominant position in development theory. Human capital theory has provided the 'scientific' basis for literacy's centrality; within the human capital framework, a 40 percent literacy rate has been held to be the threshold for economic 'takeoff' (Anderson, 1966; Blaug, 1966). In this context, literacy promotion has thrived—frequently a substitute for more urgently needed and more pragmatic interventions—and literacy campaigns have become a regular feature of international development efforts (Coombs, 1985).

But, as Chapter 1 noted, modern literacy campaigns have not been confined to regions of the world where illiteracy is obviously pervasive. For literacy campaigns or, more accurately, campaigns *against* putative illiteracy have been a recurring twentieth century phenomenon in some advanced industrialized regions, particularly the United States but, more recently, extending to include several other countries. Ironically, it is in these countries, where extensive schooling is universal, and where unprecedented levels and rates of literacy have been achieved, that literacy promotion is pursued almost exclusively through the device of *crisis* and literacy campaigns take on the character of organized *offensives*. Targets of the offensives vary to some extent, depending on the political context but, in general, the population targeted can be identified as working class. Frequently, specific sections of the class—immigrants, minorities and manual workers, for example—are targeted.

It is argued here that current literacy crises and literacy campaigns in western industrialized countries, while integrally linked to the contemporary political and economic context, are also part of a political and ideological continuum; as such, they can only be fully understood through an analysis of their historical and ideological

background. This chapter seeks to provide that background. It examines the assumptions and ideologies which inform views of the nature, power and role of literacy in the light of historical uses and valuing of literacy and of the history of the social distribution of literacy in western industrialized countries. The position taken here, following Graff (1979) and others, is critical and revisionist (see also Street, 1984; Scribner and Cole, 1981). It is argued that the connections between literacy and the range of progressive developments which it is held to underpin are far less direct than those claimed by either nineteenth and twentieth century schools promoters or, in recent decades, by academics from a range of disciplines, including sociology and anthropology, economics, linguistics and psychology (see, for example, Parsons, 1966; Goody, 1968; Goody and Watt, 1977; Blaug, 1966). It is further argued that prevailing assessments of literacy's values and impacts rest largely on unexamined beliefs and assumptions which serve to obscure the actual *uses* of literacy—in both its ideological and its operational modes—in contemporary western society.

The central hypothesis informing this chapter is that literacy crises and campaigns in industrialized countries are not about the condition of literacy in general.[2] What they are about, rather, is the condition of certain aspects of working class life and culture and the extent to which these are compatible with the requirements of capital and the capitalist state. For, although they are frequently attended by the language of broadly progressive idealism, literacy 'crises' are typically centred on the perceived deviation of the goals and/or the outcomes of public mass education from the requirements of

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[2] It should be emphasised that the discussion of literacy campaigns in this chapter does not address mass campaigns which have taken place outside industrialized countries—either in the context of religious indoctrination in pre-industrial Europe, for example, or in the context of national revolutions in twentieth century Soviet Union, China, Cuba or Nicaragua.

capital and the state. It is argued here that this central focus on the alignment of popular literacy with the requirements of capitalism—and the conflating of undesirable aspects of working class culture with illiteracy—is not unique to the late twentieth century but, on the contrary, has typified debates about mass literacy and centrally influenced the development and expansion of public systems for mass education over the past century and a half.

To look at current literacy crises and campaigns in isolation from the historical contexts of the development of state systems for mass education is to miss the essential continuities between the objectives of those who first promoted a 'proper schooling' for the working classes and those who, in the late twentieth century, would declare (working class) literacy to be in a state of crisis. It is argued in this chapter that the controlled diffusion of literacy throughout Western populations has been motivated not by the desire for an informed and participative citizenry, nor by the wish to eliminate inequality and poverty, nor even primarily by the quest for increased labour productivity; rather, the development of public systems for the schooling of the masses in nineteenth century western Europe and North America was promoted as an essential element of the legitimation of capitalist work and social organization and of emerging capitalist states. The strategy to 'capture' and shape growing mass literacy through institutionalizing its acquisition and uses was sanctioned only when it was accepted that properly controlled literacy had the potential to effect the hegemonic dominance of the capitalist class—and, in large measure, to eliminate the need for direct and coercive mechanisms of control (Johnson, 1976; Donald, 1983).

This chapter traces the development of present-day beliefs and assumptions about literacy to the nineteenth century promotion—and eventual institution—of public systems of mass education. A central element of the promotion of mass education was the problematizing of existing working class culture—the social construction of a problem of *illiteracy* among the working classes. This process is closely paralleled in many aspects of twentieth century literacy crises and campaigns in industrialized countries and, it is argued here, may be viewed as the prototype for the continuing problematizing of working class literacy. The claims which were made for the benefits of literacy—and the parallel claims which were made about the negative impacts of *illiteracy*—in the context of nineteenth century campaigns to establish systems for mass education were strikingly similar to claims made in the context of unprecedented levels and rates of popular literacy in the late twentieth century. An awareness of this essential continuity is crucial to a proper critical evaluation of present-day bases for such claims. Such a critical evaluation is also assisted by an assessment of the validity of the claims in their original context. This chapter attempts that assessment in the light of the nature of the literacy provided by public systems for mass education in the period and of historians' assessments of the verity of the claims.

The chapter begins with an examination of the social distribution of literacy historically. The divergence between popular assumptions about both the spread and the impacts of literacy and the historical reality is described. The second section of the chapter looks at the nineteenth century campaigns for mass education in England and North America—campaigns which fundamentally problematized working class life and culture but did so through invoking and building on the ideologies of 'literacy'. This

is followed by two sections which examine the impacts of nineteenth century literacy campaigning on present-day conceptions of literacy's role and power. The claims of nineteenth century schools promoters for literacy's benefits are described and assessed; the development of a 'literacy imperative'—the notion that every member of society must be literate as a condition of participation—is described. The final section of the chapter discusses the twentieth century contribution to current conceptions of literacy. This section establishes that, though recent scholarship has provided an important critique of the deterministic role of literacy, such a conception, nevertheless, maintains its hegemony.

THE SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF LITERACY: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Observers of the 1980s and 1990s workforce literacy 'crises' might well conclude that they were witnessing the discovery of a new problem of critical proportions. They might assume that until quite recently no literacy deficiencies existed, that this current crisis is a product of a combination of factors unique to the present time—among others, a failing school system and increasingly intellectually demanding work. In this case, history can offer an important corrective.

Popular notions about literacy are based on a set of assumptions and beliefs which are profoundly ahistorical. Critics of contemporary literacy abilities and practices typically hark back to a presumed 'Golden Age' when general standards of literacy were much higher than they are today, when many more people engaged in reading than now do, and when the majority read more enlightening material than is the case today (see, for example, Boyson, 1975). A key assumption of modern literacy campaigners in western industrialized countries is that the value of a universal, high

standard literacy has long (if not always) been recognized and aspired to, and that previous generations have come much closer than present generations to achieving it.

A reconstruction of the 'story' of literacy implicit in the discourse of present-day literacy promotion and literacy campaigns—if only vaguely comprehended—would go more or less as follows: There has been a steady spread of literacy throughout populations from the time of the development of the techniques of reading and writing, a spread slowed only by the limitations of particular writing systems as means of communication and by the rate of development of technological innovations in literacy. Similarly, the story goes, the steady (if necessarily gradual) diffusion of the technical skills of reading and writing made possible the philosophical, scientific and institutional developments which brought about technological progress and industrialization (with the related trends of urbanization and modernization), and the psycho-social development which made people aspire to—and at the same time made them capable of—democratic government. A Canadian editorial comment on a 1987 national literacy survey presented a typical popular rendition of this theory: "Reading and writing have been the engines of human progress since the earliest stirrings of civilization on earth. Literate societies have acquired material, intellectual and cultural riches of which those not blessed with the ability to read or write could only dream ... Our democracy and the precious freedoms it provide are rooted in literacy" (Struther, 1987:2).

It cannot be disputed that both the character of the writing system (the ease with which symbols can be learned and formed) and the nature of the materials, implements and technologies available for writing influence the *potential* for a wider social

distribution of literacy abilities and for an increased popular use of literacy. However, literacy has not developed outside of social, economic and political contexts, and many other factors—arguably more important ones—impinge on whether or not literacy skills are widely distributed. As Graff (1979, 1987) has documented, the history of the diffusion of print and the wider popular use of literacy in western society is not a simple reflection of either the potential of the writing system for wide social distribution or innovations in print and papermaking technologies. Yet, received wisdom in general fails to recognize the central influence which social and political factors have exerted on the distribution and uses of literacy historically. It is not generally recognized that, for most of its history, literacy's distribution and uses have been very restricted, the practice of literacy having been until very recently the preserve of elite groups. The modern conviction that literacy is intrinsically linked to such ideals as progress, enlightenment and liberation fails to acknowledge that, whether in the hands of religious orders or commercial/bureaucratic interests, literacy was historically useful for the power and control it allowed those who practised it (or those *for whom* they practised it) over those who did not. The "wellsprings" of reading and writing are rooted, not in the quest for collective advancement, democratic participation or the development of citizens, but, as Graff notes, in "political authority and administrative needs, theology and religion, and the requirements of commerce and trade" (1987:16).

Absent from current popular versions of the literacy 'story' is any awareness of the actual historical record of the diffusion of literacy skills and the spread of literate practices in western societies beyond privileged elites to general populations. It is not

recognized that, as literacy came to be more diffused, in part as a result of advancements in the technology of printing, the spread of literacy to the masses was not universally considered an unalloyed good or even a net benefit to society; on the contrary, its use was at times suppressed and its expansion/diffusion opposed (Johnson, 1976; Donald, 1983; Simon, 1987). For literacy was seen by important sections of ruling elites (particularly, in England, by the landed aristocracy, for example) as a potential threat to their continued hegemony. This was especially clear in periods of social change and cultural disruption—and, particularly, in the wake of the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. A literate working class, it was feared, would create social and political chaos as education would foster discontent with their subordinate position and engender social and economic aspirations beyond their rank. Though incomprehensible in the light of twentieth century conventional wisdom, as recently as 150 years ago *literacy*—not illiteracy—was the problem.[3]

It was not until near the middle of the nineteenth century that, as Graff has observed, "opposition to the universal schooling of the masses had largely vanished in Anglo America and in much of Western Europe"[4] (1979:22). However, although literacy for the masses was to become not only tolerated but stridently promoted in the latter half of the nineteenth century—with the class which had at times previously been actively denied access to education eventually being compelled to participate—the

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[3] When the Evangelical, Hannah Moore, started Sunday Schools for the poor in the late eighteenth century, she was obliged to defend the practice. She assured her critics: "I allow of no writing for the poor. My object is not to make them fanatics, but to train up the lower classes in habits of industry and piety" (Simon, 1960:133).

[4] Although there had been little opposition to mass schooling for free whites in the United States (in contrast to England in the same period), there continued throughout the nineteenth century to be strong opposition to the education of blacks (Graff, 1987).

nature of that literacy was dictated by their economic and political masters and bore little resemblance to the literacy cultivated through earlier working class self-education efforts (Simon, 1965; Johnson, 1976; Donald, 1983). Neither the nature of the skills provided, the pedagogical methods through which they were imparted, nor the organization of the system itself was designed to promote the betterment of working class life.

Although modern ideology equates the acquisition of literacy with social mobility and a diminishment of social and economic inequality, the development of the means of mass literacy (public systems of education) in the middle to late nineteenth century was in no way intended to promote such an outcome. Opposition to the diffusion of literacy to the masses had not vanished because literacy's intrinsic values (individual or collective) became clear to the ruling elites; rather, the enormous and rapid social changes which accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism left no room for the illusion that the social relations (based on rank and deference) which had characterized former periods could be sustained without active intervention on the part of the ruling classes. Although, as Johnson has observed, English working-class radicalism had constituted "a threat to the propertied classes, even ... to the security of the state" in the first half of the nineteenth century, over the longer term, the principal challenge which growing working class consciousness presented was to the 'cultural hegemony' of the dominant classes (1976:50). Coercive measures which, from the 1790s, had been used repeatedly to deal with the working class challenge to ruling class hegemony, began to be "re-worked in new forms" from the 1840s. A key component of the reworked project of hegemony was schooling which, as Johnson notes, "as a public if

not a state apparatus was *actually forced into existence* in England by the collapse of older systems of control" (ibid, emphases in original).

Far from being the means of liberating the working class—promoting political empowerment and social and economic mobility—mass education was seen as a means of shaping the class for its proper (subordinate) role. This, as Simon (1987) documents, was particularly so in England. Importantly, the acceptance of the necessity of mass education by ruling elites stemmed not only from the growing recognition that schooling, properly controlled, could serve as a valuable tool for the maintenance of order and the status quo; it was also a response to the fact that the working classes had already existing high levels of literacy and some sections of that class were intent on using literate practices for their own ends. In England, for example, there had been a substantial growth of educational institutions throughout the nineteenth century (prior to state-organized schooling) in response to working-class demand. Owenites and Chartists, in the first half of the nineteenth century, had pioneered collective literate practices in working class educational programmes, seeing these as "one potent means of revolutionizing society" (Johnson, 1976:50). And, working class educational aspirations notwithstanding, there had continued throughout the century a considerable degree of resistance by members of the working class to the kinds of education provided for them by the middle class. Many working class families, for example, continued to send their children to local 'Dame Schools', in preference to schools controlled by churches where religion and a middle class morality formed the core of

instruction.[5] In the last third of the nineteenth century, in both England and North America, labour unions and socialists were defining working class educational needs in terms of socialist ideas, and striving to create opportunities for better education for their class (Simon, 1965; Graff, 1979).

The development of state-organized mass education was, in part, a move to control the kinds of literacy which the working class would develop and the uses to which they would put that literacy. The overriding goal of mass education, in both Britain and North America, was the training of the newly forming working classes for their proper (subordinate) role in the social and economic structure and the establishment of hegemonic control in a period of unprecedented social and economic change.[6]

NINETEENTH CENTURY LITERACY CAMPAIGNING

Although it is less than two centuries since, as Donald (1983) has put it, "illiteracy became a problem (and literacy stopped being one)", there has developed in this remarkably short time, historically considered, an ideology which equates literacy with civilization itself and which views an ever increasing standard of universal literacy as a moral, social and economic imperative. The roots of such an ideology can be traced, in part, to the broad educational legacy of the eighteenth century, rooted in Enlightenment ideals and embraced by the liberal middle classes, and, in

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[5] As Johnson notes, "Private schooling ... was one of those indigenous working-class educational practices against which mass schooling was defined and which it was intended to replace" (1976:44).

[6] As Graff has noted, "though the nature of the opposition (to mass education) had differed from place to place, from Great Britain to the Canadian provinces and the American republic, the educational solutions reached early in the century were similar in goals and content, if not always in structural forms" (1979:22).

part, to the campaigning efforts of nineteenth century schools promoters and liberal social reformers.

To the late twentieth century observer of literacy crises and campaigns, much of the rhetoric of nineteenth century literacy promotion would be familiar.[7] Literacy's impacts, it was claimed, were wide ranging and entirely positive. Literacy's benefits were both collective and individual, though collective benefits were stressed in the early schools promotion era. Literacy (or education) had the power to transform individuals and classes, to turn the idle and dangerous into productive and conforming members of society. Conversely, illiteracy condemned individuals and classes to criminality, idleness and pauperism. The parallels with twentieth century presentations of illiteracy are strong; for this reason, the contexts in which links were first made between illiteracy and criminality (and deviance more broadly defined), poverty, idleness and a range of other socially proscribed characteristics are particularly germane to the analysis of twentieth century interpretations and presentations of the issue. If we look at the institution of mass working class education in the nineteenth century, we can find trends in both analyses and strategies which clearly parallel present-day literacy crises and campaigns.

The context From the eighteenth century, education had come to be valued for its potential to develop the individual and society. Belief in the progress of civilization and in the capacity of humankind for rational improvement, fundamental elements of

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[7] It should be noted that historians have not generally distinguished *literacy*, *schooling*, and *education*. In this discussion of schools promotion in the nineteenth century, *literacy* is synonymous with *schooled literacy*, except as the context otherwise makes clear. The terms appear to have been used interchangeably in the period. At any rate, as this chapter discusses, only a properly schooled literacy was endorsed or promoted, literacy by itself having been seen as a potentially subversive medium.

Enlightenment thought, formed the basis of this strong educational legacy. Early advocates of an expanded role for education had included the classical political economist, Adam Smith and the liberal philosopher, John Stuart Mill who, as a Member of Parliament in 1860s England, fought for expanded education and the extension of the franchise (Williams, 1980). In post-revolution America, education was seen as a cornerstone of citizenship and the 'republican life' and, as Graff notes, "A surge of interest in education followed the advent of nationhood" (1987:341). In spite of such recognition of the value of education, however, schooling remained for many decades largely restricted on social class lines—its presumed benefits appropriate for bestowal, not on the basis of membership in the human race, but on the basis of social class background and, in the case of the United States—where the education of slaves was prohibited after 1820—on the basis of racial origins as well (ibid). The century which saw the beginnings of universal mass education in both North America and England was marked by intense struggles over the issue, despite a growing consensus on education's potential benefits. Outright opposition to mass schooling had persisted throughout the first half of the nineteenth century—particularly among the ruling aristocracy in England.

Yet, the shift from censuring to compelling universal mass education was, in historical terms, swift indeed; for it is to the nineteenth century that we can also trace the development of a 'literacy myth', particularly in North America (Graff, 1987a). Promulgated by social reformers and schools promoters, as well as employers of labour, the literacy myth conflated literacy (by which was meant mass schooling) with increasing social harmony, decreasing criminality and accelerated economic develop-

ment, including increased economic advantage for the individual. Schools promoters were especially key to this process as they worked to persuade ruling class opponents of mass education, as well as large sections of the working classes, of the necessity of universal mass education. This required elaborating a positive rationale for literacy as well as constructing *illiteracy* as a problem. The process through which this would be accomplished constituted a sustained and increasingly organized, broad-based campaign spanning several decades mid-century. The success of that campaign was impressive. For, as Graff notes, by the late nineteenth century, the importance of mass literacy was virtually a given; "all opposition was branded reactionary and overcome (in theory if not in fact)" (1979:xiv)

The campaigns Although there had been earlier (religiously motivated) literacy campaigns in Sweden, Prussia and Scotland, the campaign for public mass education by educationalists and social reformers in the nineteenth century was unprecedented in its scope. Like their late twentieth century counterparts, nineteenth century literacy campaigners (or schools promoters) based their arguments for the necessity of mass education on a set of *claims*—claims about the benefits of literacy, on the one hand, and about the impacts of illiteracy on the other. The strategy of schools promotion was to problematize the existing condition of working-class 'literacy' and the general condition of working class life and culture and, simultaneously, to present mass schooling as the solution to these problems. The definition of what would constitute appropriate 'literacy' or 'education', the identification of features of the society and the individual which would require changing through such education, and, finally, the nature of the desired change—all entailed a valuing of the existing social and cultural

conditions and, as the valuing was undertaken on behalf of the ruling classes in reference to the working class, it inevitably entailed a rejection of many (or most) aspects of working class life.

In his account of English working class schooling in this period, Johnson notes that the analysis and rhetoric of supporters of universal mass education for working class children was consistent with the "whole massive social problem genre of the 1830s and 1840s" (1976:48). What the social problem literature—and schools promoters—did, he claims, was to stigmatize the "whole way of life" of the working class. The process of promoting mass education entailed a "comprehensive indictment" of working-class "belief and behaviour—all the characteristic institutions, folklore, 'common sense' and mentalities of the class, its culture (or cultures) in the broad anthropological meaning of the word" (Johnson, 1976:49). Of course, the language and arguments of schools promoters was not simply a rhetorical strategy to win support for expanded (and publicly supported) education for all working class children. As Johnson's, Simon's and Graff's historical work demonstrates, the rhetoric reflected quite closely the intent of educationalists and social reformers to 'remake' the working class. Public provision of education for all working class children for at least a part of their childhood lives was motivated by what Johnson has characterized as a form of cultural aggression "organic to this phase of capitalist development" (1976:49). More than "social control", what was sought, he claims, was "class-cultural *transformations*" (ibid, emphasis in original).

This, then, was the context in which the condition of working class 'literacy' was first presented as a social problem, amenable to solution only through exposure to the

curative of a properly controlled education—an education intended to undermine working class children's allegiance to the cultural practices of their class and to inculcate the attitudes and values necessary to the success of industrial capitalism. The habits and discipline of factory life had to be learned, as did thrift and a respect for private property. Conscious as well as unconscious resistance to industrial capitalism had to be overcome. In effect, as Johnson has observed, the reproduction of the older popular culture had to be stopped "if capitalist development in town and countryside was to be speeded and secured. Modern industry *did* need new elements in human nature, *did* require the learning of new relations" (1976:49, emphases in original).

That a similar impetus drove schools promotion in North America is established by Graff in his study of nineteenth century literacy in Ontario (Canada). He argues that literacy was linked integrally with "social morality" by social reformers and schools promoters in this period. Literacy, understood as the ability to read and write, was not seen as an end in itself. On the contrary, "Literacy alone ... that is, isolated from its moral basis" was, he notes, "feared as potentially subversive" (1987b:53). Reformers identified both illiterate children and the growing numbers of literate adults, "able to use their literacy without restraint" as problematic, "a barrier to the spread of middle class values considered essential to social order and economic progress" (ibid). The solution would be the "dispensation of print and literacy in environments carefully structured for that specific purpose, and instruction in the normative code and the socially approved uses of literacy" (ibid). As Graff notes, what the reformers promoted was not literacy *per se*, but "the literacy of properly

schooled, *morally restrained* men and women" (1979:23). This literacy, he argues, "was expected to contribute vitally to the reordering and reintegration of the 'new' society of the nineteenth century; it represented one central instrument and vehicle in the efforts to secure social, cultural, economic and political cohesion in the political economy of the expanding capitalist order" (ibid:25).

In North America, as in England, the process of promoting literacy was as much one of stigmatizing the lack of education (or, more accurately, the lack of schooling) as of championing the benefits. In the language of schools promotion, "Experience, knowledge acquired from others, and common sense (were) ignored, relegated behind the promoted benefits of schooling"[8] (ibid:206). But, the repudiation—both implicit and explicit—of knowledge and ability among the unschooled working class was not the sole weapon in the schools promoters' arsenal. They also used the threat of relative loss of position for the unschooled. As Graff notes, Ontario's most influential educationalist and schools promoter in the nineteenth century, Egerton Ryerson, emphasized "the loss of status and downward mobility, which he claimed would accompany the lack of schooling" more than "upward mobility through education. Educated men might advance; the uneducated would surely fall" (ibid).

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[8] Graff cites a Dr. Edward Jarvis' pseudoscientific contrast between educated and uneducated labour, based on an analysis of "... 'processes of labor' of woodcutters, woodsplitters, turners, coalheavers, shovellers, and others ...". Jarvis' conclusion is that "the discreet shoveller [to take one case] carries his shovel to a point in the circle when the tangential movement, modified by gravitation, shall describe a curve which at its highest part is above the cart-wheel...As the blade of the shovel is held at right angles with the plane of the curve of motion, all the contents are carried in a curve of the same radius...and all fall together in to the vehicle in a compact mass; none are lost on the way." In contrast, the uneducated laborer or "thoughtless workman, unaccustomed to noticing the exact relation to things, and having not comprehensive plan of his operations, places his cart by accident...Or, as chance, not intelligent observation, governs this matter, the receptacle may be so far off as to require the workman to walk a step or two....Nor is this dull laborer always mindful of the position of his shovel when he throws its contents" (1979:206).

NINETEENTH CENTURY ROOTS OF CURRENT LITERACY IDEOLOGY

Present-day conceptions of literacy assume a direct causal link between the commencement of mass education (and the pursuit of universal literacy) in the nineteenth century and the social, economic and political developments which have taken place over the last hundred years. The rise of literacy and its spread throughout the population is associated, in Graff's terms, with "the triumph of light over darkness, of liberalism, democracy, and of universal unbridled progress" (1979:xv). The association may be understood, in part, by the simple fact of the *coincidence* of mass education and rising literacy with a range of other social and economic developments, including industrialization, urbanization and modernization, as well as with the development of what Therborn (1977) has termed 'bourgeois democracy'. However, similar ideas about literacy were already being articulated by schools promoters and social reformers in early nineteenth century England and North America—decades before the achievement (or even the pursuit) of universal literacy—in the very early days of industrialization and urbanization and significantly before universal enfranchisement or the growth of democratic institutions. They were, in fact, ideas which had originated in Enlightenment ideals about the potential of (liberal) education to develop (middle class) individuals and their society. Radical sections of the working class had also subscribed to the idea of education's value for human, social and political development. The currency of such ideas was to prove useful in the promotion of mass education, even if the education promoted and eventually instituted bore little or no resemblance to either Enlightenment or radical ideals. But promoters of mass education made other claims to support their cause, claims which were

calculated to mollify opposition and gain wide support for publicly funded mass education. And, in the spirit of campaigners, they also amassed (statistical, anecdotal and rhetorical) evidence to support their claims (Johnson, 1976; Graff, 1987b).

One notable feature of nineteenth century schools promotion—and, importantly, one which has typified literacy campaigning throughout the intervening period and into the present—was the way in which the advocates of mass education spoke to the interests and concerns of all sectors, from the aristocracy, to the employers of labour, to the working class itself, including organized labour. Arguments and claims were marshalled to appeal to the varied (and frequently conflicting) interests of these disparate groupings, though the balance of political and economic power dictated whose concerns would be the main focus of campaigning and whose interests would be primarily served by the system of education instituted.

The claims It is an irony that, although mass education had been opposed by the ruling aristocracy because it was assumed that literacy would kindle social and political aspirations or even inspire revolution, as has been noted, the role of education in the elimination of social unrest and upheaval—which had accompanied the rise of industrial and commercial capitalism—constituted the central plank in nineteenth century schools promotion platforms. Social problems and social disorder (including poverty, criminality and vice), as well as organized working class agitation, were presented by reformers as effects of illiteracy and ignorance, amenable to correction or control not primarily by social and political reforms but by a properly controlled schooling. The promotion of mass education to its political opponents entailed the presentation of education as *against* disorder and social upheaval and *for* social and

political stability. Schools promoters—including, for example, Horace Mann in Massachusetts, Egerton Ryerson in Ontario, and James Kay Shuttleworth in England—worked to persuade the ruling classes that education for the masses would benefit their class through increasing morality and civility in their relations with their betters (Donald, 1983; Graff, 1987a, 1987b; Kay Shuttleworth, 1853).

Industrial and economic objectives constituted another driving force behind the promotion of mass education, particularly as it was promoted to (and by) the emerging capitalist class. Claims for the economic benefits of literacy—indeed, for the *necessity* of literacy for the accomplishment of social and economic development and progress—were central to nineteenth century schools promotion. Collective benefits (economic growth, social stability and national advancement) took precedence over individual benefits (intellectual development or material advancement). The argument that literacy made workers easier to manage,[9] and enhanced worker productivity and economic development, was used explicitly to gain the support of employers for the expansion of public education for the masses.[10] And though, as Graff notes, "economic and labor history describe the period very differently", claims continued to be made in both Canada and America for the economic impacts of education. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the full case for literacy's human capital impacts was being made—as illustrated, for example, in the words of an education promoter

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[9] That employers were inclined to agree with the claim is indicated in the words of a Massachusetts industrialist writing to Horace Mann in 1841, vouching for the 'noncognitive' consequences of education: "... in times of agitation ... I have always looked to the most intelligent, best educated, and the most moral for support. But the ignorant and uneducated I have generally found most turbulent and troublesome, acting under the impulse of excited passion and jealousy" (in Bowles and Gintis, 1976:109).

[10] Among the employer class, significant opposition to mass schooling came from the employers of child labour (Green, 1991; Graff, 1987b).

from the period: "Education ... is the economy of force, and gives it a greater power to create value. It enables the intelligent and skilful to add more to the worth of matter than the ignorant" (in Graff, 1979:207). Horace Mann, the first Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education and a central figure in nineteenth century educational thought in Anglo-America, devoted much of his 1842 annual report "to the economic benefits of education". His primary objective in the report, Graff notes, "was to argue that education was the most productive enterprise that could be undertaken by an individual or a community" (ibid:203).

Although schools promoters frequently held out the promise of material advancement for successful individuals, the message was a mixed one. For one chief aim of the enterprise of schooling was to fit workers for their (subordinate) social position, including the occupations which they would be required to fill. Though job skills did not form a part of their education, working class children were "not to be educated to despise their occupations ... Education must not alienate labor" (Graff, 1979:201). Yet, in spite of the explicit (and intended) limitations of mass schooling—and the evidence of people's lived experience—the argument that education could provide the means of individual material advancement and an avenue for social mobility was pressed by schools promoters in the period. Indeed, in North America it was used quite consciously to 'sell' members of the working class on the idea of sending their children to school. And as Graff notes, however incorrect they may have been, the "promoters' emphasis on skills and individual wages" was "undoubtedly central to popular acceptance of public schooling" (1979:206).

Assessing nineteenth century claims for literacy's impacts The forms which mass education took, and the conditions under which working class children were educated in the nineteenth century, were more closely aligned with some of the schools promoters' claims than with others. For, in both England and North America, the principal objective of mass schooling was the development of attitudes and behaviours befitting the subordinate social status of the working class and appropriate for their future employment in the capitalist workplace. The claims for literacy's benefits for the individual—for example, in terms of material gain or social mobility—bore little relation to the actual nature of the literacy provided by public mass education systems.

Though nineteenth century literacy promoters drew on ideas associated with elite education to promote education for (and to) the masses, mass education differed dramatically in both kind and degree from that provided for elites. A theory of education based on an idea of *scholarship*, of education as a process of free enquiry and exposure to literature (and culture generally) and science, served to value a type of schooling which was in most respects its opposite and which had, in part, been set up as an (imposed) alternative to broader working class models of education (Donald, 1983). The focus of mass education was not the cultivation of knowledge or critical thinking skills, which had long characterized some forms of elite education and the majority of working class self education efforts; rather, it was the incul-cation—through direct instruction, institutional structures, pedagogic methods and behavioural strictures—of religion-based morality and habits of docility, discipline and industry. Rote memorization and oral reading, without regard for comprehension, formed the core pedagogic technique of working class schooling. Writing was

restricted to copying; composition was not generally taught (Resnick and Resnick, 1977; Graff, 1979). Schools were crowded and uncomfortable, frequently feared and avoided because of their role in the spread of disease; teachers were generally poorly qualified; children commonly left school by the age of 10 or 11 and, for many, instruction occupied a very small portion of their time in school (Graff, 1979).

Both the extent and the quality of mass literacy in nineteenth century England and North America left much to be desired. Yet schools promoters succeeded in creating a consensus around their inflated claims for the individual and societal impacts of that literacy. For, notwithstanding crowded and uncomfortable facilities, extreme regimentation and discipline, and pedagogic drudgery under the tutelage of overworked and underqualified teachers, the product of the common school was held to be distinguished from the unschooled, as the civilized were from the uncivilized.

Though the claims for literacy's social and economic impacts proved to be important and persuasive arguments in nineteenth century schools promotion, evidence for the verity of the claims is less than persuasive. With respect to the collective economic benefits of literacy and the claims which attributed to literacy a central role in industrial and economic development, Simon notes that, in England, "industrial development in the mid to late (nineteenth) century still owed little to institutionalized education" (1987:97). Indeed, Green argues that Britain's "early and successful industrialization" actually had a negative impact on the development of education, first in removing "that most powerful incentive for educational development ... that is, the desire to catch up economically"; secondly, in engendering a "complacent view of

technical education";[11] and thirdly, by creating "an enormous thirst for child labour in industry which forced working-class parents to allow their children to forfeit education to provide an additional wage and which set the manufacturing class against the extension of working-class education" (1991a:8-9). In fact, several studies have demonstrated that industrialization was in many cases associated with a *decline* in the acquisition and use of literacy skills due to many factors including child labour and the deskilled nature of most factory work (see, for example, Sanderson, 1967; Schofield, 1968).

Equally critical to the human capital argument for mass education was the impact of literacy on the productivity and earning capacity of the individual. Acceptance of this idea—of the potential for individuals to overcome disadvantage through education—has played an important role in the legitimation of the hierarchical, class divided nature of work in capitalist systems and the inequalities inherent in capitalist societies in general (see, for example, Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Yet, though the working class came to generally accept the promise that education would improve the conditions and the rewards of their work—and, in North America, to believe that education would provide the means to escape their social class—as Graff (1979) notes, ascription (including racial and ethnic origin and gender) played a far greater role in determining this than did education or literacy.

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[11] As Green explains, "Since Britain had achieved an industrial revolution through the technical accomplishments of largely self-taught engineers, it was wrongly concluded that further economic development had no need of anything but the old empirical and *ad hoc* methods of scientific and technical learning" (1991a:8-9).

A LITERACY *IMPERATIVE*

The claims which were advanced for the benefits of schooling—and of literacy generally—were instrumental in overcoming both opposition and indifference to mass education. The promoters of mass education had, in large measure, succeeded in their crusade to have all sectors of society accept the wisdom (and the inevitability) of the goal of universal compulsory literacy. The way in which literacy would be defined in the context of working class education and the means by which it would be achieved would differ significantly between nations (and even regions), but the ideology of literacy—which underpinned emerging systems for working class education—was common to all three countries. And, regardless of the verity of the claims for literacy's benefits, they had become doctrine by the turn of the century.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century marked a period of expansion of schooling for working class children and increased working class aspirations for education. Compulsory attendance became more common and more commonly enforced and, in many jurisdictions, the school leaving age was raised. There continued to be extreme variations in working class experiences of education, however, and many children had little or no opportunity to gain more than the most rudimentary of literacy skills. In many American states, education was not compulsory or compulsion was not enforced; this was reflected in low attendance rates generally and, in many areas, lack of schooling opportunities.[12] In Ontario

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[12] Cook notes that, "Although New York (State) had had a compulsory attendance law since 1854, the law had not been enforced." In 1906 a new law introduced penalties aimed at parents and children for nonattendance. Virginia, she notes, enacted a statute which placed "a compulsory school law on the books" in 1908 but which left it up to school districts to choose whether to avail of the law or not. In general, Cook notes, the "less urban and rural" areas of the South had high proportions of illiterates among native born citizens (1977:6-7).

(Canada), Graff notes, social class (along with other ascriptive factors including ethnicity and gender) continued to be the "primary determinant" of school attendance (1979:158). And in England, where the struggle for state provision of working class education had been bitterly fought for decades, debates about the organization and objectives of that education were by no means resolved with the passing of the 1870 Education Act. The Act had permitted, rather than mandated, local authorities to provide elementary[13] education and, initially, fees were charged (Simon, 1987; Green, 1990). It was not until 1918 that schooling became compulsory for all children between the ages of five and fourteen in England (Lewis, 1953:38). On both sides of the Atlantic, child labour continued to interfere with the education of a significant proportion of children into the twentieth century.[14]

Yet, although mass schooling did little to ensure a minimum (much less a common) standard of literacy, expectations of the outcomes of that schooling began to be expressed in inflated terms even at this early stage of its development. And, notwithstanding the limited quality and extent of public education, employers in the early decades of the twentieth century had moved from championing the qualities of the schooled worker (over the unschooled) to complaining about the poor quality of worker produced by the education system (Wright, 1977; Cook, 1977). While relatively little was put into public education, a high standard was, nevertheless,

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[13] It should be noted that, unlike in North America, "elementary" education in England was specifically working class education; "secondary" education was not the next stage of schooling, but specifically middle class education.

[14] Cook notes, for example, that New York State, in an effort to supplement a new school attendance law and "eliminate the roots of illiteracy", passed labor legislation (in 1906) which "prohibited children under fourteen from working in factories and those between fourteen and sixteen were required to have certificates" (1977:6).

expected to issue from it. In fact, the provision of mass (elementary) education was by no means universal when the *criterion* of literacy began to be applied universally.

Historical roots of American difference Thus far, this chapter has examined the nineteenth century promotion of mass schooling in England and Anglo-America, and the construction of a literacy imperative, as more or less similar (and concurrent) social movements. The objective has been to draw attention to the ways in which current assumptions and ideas about literacy are rooted in shared cultural and ideological traditions (particularly Enlightenment ideals) and in responses to the development of industrial capitalism. And, since there was also significant communication between those involved in schools and literacy promotion on either side of the Atlantic and across the North American border throughout the nineteenth century, the connections were not only those of shared culture and history. Direct borrowing and sharing of ideas and strategies also took place (Graff, 1979).

Yet, though there had been strong similarities in approach to the promotion of mass education, there were also considerable differences, between England and Anglo-America generally, in the social and political contexts in which that promotion took place and in which systems of mass education were eventually established. One key difference was in the nature of the obstacles which the promoters of mass education had confronted. The task of schools promoters in Anglo-America was to build a consensus on the need for an educated populace and for a degree of state control and compulsion to achieve this. Social reformers did not face the outright (and persistent) opposition to mass education which the ruling classes mounted in England. Cook argues that, in the United States, the "prevailing (negative) attitude of the general

public" towards compulsion (in respect of anything) and towards state intervention were among the chief barriers to the achievement of universal literacy. Notwithstanding such problems, however, republican ideals and increasing extensions of the franchise throughout the century, coupled with what Green (1991a:8) identifies as the "populist rhetoric of American capitalism" and a "nationalistic drive towards development", provided a ready basis for an acceptance of the necessity of universal literacy. The early achievement by some states of universal enrolment in elementary education combined with punitive measures to curb the rights of so-called 'illiterates' to reinforce the notion that literacy was everybody's obligation, even if it was at that stage far from a right.[15] Another key difference was the role which mass education was expected to play. For, unlike in England, where mass education—when it was eventually accepted—would operate in an explicit way to reinforce existing class divisions, in Anglo-America, education's function was intended to be more of an *integrative* one. Nation building was at the core of education's role and, to accomplish this, schooling was expected, not to accentuate and reinforce differences as in England, but to obscure them. What Graff (1979) terms 'cultural homogenization' would blur both ethnic and social class distinctions and foster the notion of the 'classless' society. Though class divisions would remain intact, education was viewed as a key mechanism by which hegemonic acceptance of these divisions would be achieved.

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[15] Such measures included exclusion from the suffrage and curbs on immigration, for example (Therborn, 1977; Levine, 1986).

As mass education systems became more established and as a greater proportion of children attended school for increasingly longer periods, outright opposition to universal education was to disappear and both resistance and indifference would come to be actively stigmatized on both sides of the Atlantic. In this context, the direct promotion of literacy—through the kinds of campaigning strategies associated with earlier schools promotion—to a large extent ended. This was truer of both Canada and England (and, indeed, of most other western nations) than of the United States, however. For here, consistently high levels of immigration and a strong nationalistic drive ensured the continued prominence of mass education (with its integrative functions) as a public issue. By the turn of the century, 'Americanization' was an expressly stated aim of education (Cook, 1977). 'Literacy'—though variously defined and measured—would become one of the measures of the success of this programme of integration and Americanization. 'Illiteracy' (though also only vaguely defined) would continue to be used to problematize the very existence of large sections of the working class, just as it had been used since the early nineteenth century.

Although the promotion of literacy in the United States in the nineteenth century had roughly paralleled that of other western countries, there were crucial distinctions even at that early stage. For, well before the end of the nineteenth century, there had been clear indications in the United States of the potentially negative uses of the 'literacy imperative'. An electoral literacy criterion had been enforced in some states—effectively disenfranchising many who would otherwise have had the right to vote—in a period when other states were still a long way from achieving universal enrolment in elementary education and while the battle over whether the working class

should be educated at all still raged in England.[16] In the 1850s, for example, both Connecticut and Massachusetts introduced 'literacy tests' for prospective voters—tests which, as Levine (1986) notes, were calculated to exclude new poor Irish immigrants from the vote.[17] The literacy laws effectively replaced the property qualification attendant on the right to vote which, as Therborn (1977) observes, had been removed in many parts of America in the first half of the nineteenth century. What these laws signalled was not the legislatures' belief in the necessity of a literate and informed citizenry, but the willingness of a state to use the ideology of literacy to undermine the very principle of democracy. Following the Civil War and the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment which enfranchised the black male population, similar tests were introduced in eight Southern states in an overt attempt to circumvent the measure (Levine, 1986). In fact, manipulative literacy requirements were among a number of measures which barred both blacks and poor whites from voting in the southern United States well into the twentieth century (ibid).

By the turn of the century, literacy had become a normative expectation in the United States, even though, for many, there were few prospects of meeting that expectation. In the first decades of the twentieth century, a standard of literacy began to be defined, against which everybody might be judged regardless of their exposure

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[16] Although England did not secure agreement on the desirability of mass education until the passage of the Education Act of 1870, some of the northern American states had virtually achieved universal enrolment in elementary education (for whites) by the middle of the nineteenth century (Green, 1991).

[17] The full extent of this manipulative use of literacy tests is indicated by Levine who, citing Heath (1981), notes that the Irish "tended to be active supporters of the Democratic cause" (1986:158). With respect to the literacy of Irish immigrants, Graff notes that transatlantic (Irish) emigration was generally positively correlated with literacy. "The most illiterate and poorest western (Irish) counties ... sent few permanent migrants before the end of the century" (1987:338).

to schooling. Failure to meet that standard would be seen, in general, as a failure of the individual (or his ethnic or familial grouping), rather than as an indication of the failure of mass education systems to advance an adequate level of literacy.

THE IDEOLOGY OF LITERACY: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY'S CONTRIBUTION

The tendency to overstate the benefits of literacy, which began in earnest in schools promotion campaigns in the nineteenth century, not only persisted into the twentieth century but, as education continued to expand throughout the century, the 'mythologizing' of literacy began to be extended and elaborated upon. A number of factors have played a role in this. Educationalists—particularly those involved in adult education and social reform—have continued to promote literacy and to decry persisting illiteracy among adults. In the United States, educationalists have lobbied throughout the century for increasing minimum acceptable levels of literacy and, concomitantly, expansion of educational systems to ensure the achievement of those minima (Cook, 1977; others). Social scientists from a number of disciplines, following the lead of nineteenth century social reformers and schools promoters, have sought to establish the 'scientific' bases for links between literacy and a range of social and economic indicators. Anthropologists, psychologists, linguists and economists have endeavoured to establish theoretical bases for the beliefs and assumptions which propelled the nineteenth century institution of public mass education systems and

which have justified the ongoing development and expansion of those systems throughout most of the twentieth century.[18]

Though occasionally reflecting contemporary political divergences, twentieth century debates about literacy have been remarkably uniform in their interpretations of literacy and their assessments of the potential of literacy to benefit the individual and society. As Graff notes, for example, the capitalist versus socialist or communist split which has marked twentieth century international politics has not been absent from international discussions on literacy or United Nations literacy efforts in Third World countries. Reviewing the 1975 UNESCO-sponsored International Symposium for Literacy, however, he also notes that, in spite of the political splits, even those critical of past (and present) literacy efforts and of the uses and distribution of literacy, generally subscribed to the "traditional, progressive interpretations of literacy and education" and, "regardless of ... political persuasion, reflect[ed] a central tendency to overemphasize the power of literacy" (1987b: 49-50).

As in the nineteenth century, so throughout the twentieth century to the present time, the notion of literacy operates primarily at a symbolic level. The tendency has been to ascribe to literacy a primacy over many (if not most) other socio-cultural variables and to equate (an arbitrarily defined) mastery of the skills of reading and writing with progress—whether individual or collective—without reference to the sociohistorical context. Claims for its benefits are made without reference to either the knowledge or skills which comprise that literacy, the circumstances under which it

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[18] Brian Street (1984) provides a comprehensive and critical account of the role of scholars from a number of disciplines in the perpetuation of the literacy 'myth'.

is acquired or the conditions under which it is used. Indeed, in many respects, twentieth century scholarship has reified literacy to an extent which nineteenth century literacy promotion had not. For much of the nineteenth century, popular literacy had continued to be acquired informally as well as through organized schooling. As already noted, one of the arguments of nineteenth century schools promoters was that popular literacy on its own was potentially dangerous; the literacy they promoted was not literacy *per se*, but a 'properly schooled' literacy. And, although they tended to conflate the whole bundle which constituted public mass education with literacy, the benefits they claimed for literacy were explicitly the benefits of schooled literacy.

With the virtual achievement of universal elementary schooling in the majority of Western countries by the middle of the twentieth century, literacy became synonymous with schooling and the distinction between literacy and *schooled* literacy became essentially academic. Curiously, though, until very recently—with the work of Scribner and Cole (1981), Street (1984), and Graff (1979, 1987a, 1987b), for example—academics themselves have effectively disregarded any distinction between literacy and schooled literacy. In several key theoretical studies of literacy, the characteristics of print and the act of reading—irrespective of context—are held to account for changes in individual cognitive, behaviourial, affective and attitudinal development. Marvin notes, for example, that in the work of social theorists such as Walter Ong (1967), Jack Goody (1986) and Eric Havelock (1982), culturally expressed characteristics such as "psychological individualism and social heterodoxy" are held to result directly from "certain features of texts and textual practice" (1988:68-69). Street (1984) observes that, in the work of social anthropologists such

as Goody (1968, 1977), the theorizing related to literacy and illiteracy corresponds, in essence, to the now discredited anthropological theory of a 'great divide' between 'primitive' and 'modern' cultures. In fact, Goody advanced the literacy:illiteracy distinction as a useful replacement for the primitive:modern 'great divide' theory. The distinction between literacy and illiteracy is, according to Goody, similar to the traditional distinction between 'logical' and 'pre-logical', a distinction which, he claims, is directly attributable to the inherent qualities of print and human interaction with it (Street, 1984:5).

In both academic and popular analyses in the twentieth century, literacy and illiteracy are typically conceptualized as dichotomous states. At the social level, as Street observes "great divide theory assumes that there is a difference of kind as well as degree between societies with mass literacy and those with only minority or elite literacy" (1990:5). Only those societies which have achieved sufficiently high literacy rates can enjoy "the benefits of modernisation, progress, industrialisation and participation in the world economic order" (ibid). Literacy is, thus, conceived as a central (and independent) variable which, among a number of factors, distinguishes the modern and advanced societies from the less developed.

The 'great divide' theory has assumed explanatory power, not only at the level of cultures and societies, but also at the level of the individual. It is assumed that so-called 'illiterates' lack the higher mental competencies which literacy supposedly fosters—including logic, judgement and critical facility. Street notes that the 'illiterate', taken together, are seen to make up an 'underdeveloped nation' within a

nation: "give them literacy and they will achieve social mobility, ... political equality and participation in the social order"[19] (ibid).

Just as nineteenth century schools promoters repudiated the skills, abilities and intellectual capacities of the unschooled, so, in the twentieth century, have those labelled 'illiterate' been portrayed as profoundly deficient—lacking not only the ability to read and write or higher order cognitive abilities but also common sense, basic human functioning skills, personal morality and social values.[20] In industrialized countries, illiterate individuals are portrayed as diametrically opposed to those who are literate. They are more prone to social 'deviance' (ranging from out-of-wedlock procreation to single parenthood to drug and alcohol abuse), criminality, poverty and dependency. Incapable of preventing either ill health or accidents, they are a drain on health care budgets. They are, in large measure, responsible for unemployment and underemployment and for the supposed large numbers of jobs which go unfilled for lack of qualified workers; when they do work, they constitute a danger to themselves and their co-workers, directly responsible for workplace accidents and for driving up the costs of workers' compensation. They undermine the enterprises which employ them through driving down productivity and profitability. Within the justice system, they make "incoherent witnesses", "indefensible defendants" and "injudicious jurors"

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[19] Such a conception prevails, as Thomas notes, in the domain of international deliberations on literacy where, "A recent concept ties together all the illiterates of the globe into the 'Fifth World'" (1983:12).

[20] Examples range from Wrong's (1945) presentation of African illiterates as in danger of being killed at railway crossings, injured by machinery or deceived into taking the wrong bus or train because of their illiteracy, to Kozol's (1985) description of a feed lot worker accidentally poisoning a herd of cattle, to that of a Canadian educator who asserted that sub-literates lack the 'middle-class values' which underpin modern societies: "They do not understand the provident care of property, the careful rearing of children, present sacrifice for future advantage, the long struggle involved in acquiring a saleable profession or skill, the drive to achieve increasing importance and higher responsibility. They are not motivated by a desire for personal independence, for civic responsibility, for prestige and status" (Webb, 1972:18).

(Kozol, 1985:17). They are unable to participate effectively in the defense of their nation, both incapable of safely operating equipment and weaponry and, in combat, unable to appreciate the "moral or immoral consequences of their actions" (ibid). They jeopardize the national economy through the costs associated with dependency on the state, through foregone wages associated with low human capital value, and through 'underconsumption' associated with both low incomes and lack of consumer sophistication (Kozol, 1985; CBTFL, 1988a).

Contemporary literacy studies—like popular accounts and public discourse—have drawn conclusions about the cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural consequences of literacy and, by implication, illiteracy. Graff observes, for example, that functionally literate adults in developing countries, according to those studies, are "more empathetic, more innovative, ... more achievement motivated, and more cosmopolitan than illiterates; they also have larger farms, greater exposure to media and political information, and more often serve as opinion leaders. Literates, in addition, identify more often with a nation than a community or ethnic group, aspire to post-secondary education for sons, and are more aware of new opportunities" (1979:6). Literacy is associated with "such attitudes as acceptance of birth control and technological progress"; illiteracy, by implication, is associated with resistance to them (ibid:6). In both developing and industrialized countries, illiteracy is typically represented in the language of disease—in Levine's terms, as a "kind of 'cultural pathogen' susceptible to complete eradication by the widespread administration of a standardised educational treatment" (1986:27). Literacy campaigns—from the United Nations campaigns of the 1960s and early 1970s to the current North American campaigns—have consistently

employed the metaphors of disease and epidemic and characterized educational interventions with undereducated adults as 'attacks' and 'wars' whose goals are nothing short of 'eradication' of the virus, 'elimination' of the disease.

In the international arena, twentieth century conceptions of literacy have been, as Graff observes, fundamentally progressive and optimistic (1987b:50). International literacy conferences hosted by the United Nations agency for education, culture and science (UNESCO) have provided a forum for both experts and policy makers to debate the issue and to formulate definitions and policy responses. In spite of what appear to be wide differences of perspective in these forums, there has been surprising unanimity of outlook on the power of literacy to transform individuals and societies (Street,1984). Disagreement has tended to focus on the nature of that transformation; it has not questioned the fact of the transformation. The Declaration of Persepolis which came out of the 1975 International Symposium for Literacy in Persepolis, Iran—one of the landmark United Nations literacy events of the century—defined literacy as "not just the process of learning the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, but a contribution to the liberation of man and to his full development. Thus conceived, literacy creates the conditions for the acquisition of a critical consciousness of the contradictions of society in which man lives and of its aims; it also stimulates initiative and his participation in the creation of projects capable of acting upon the world, of transforming it, and of defining the aims of an authentic human development" (International Symposium for Literacy, 1975). The Persepolis conference was not unique for, as Graff observes, international literacy conferences have typically made "tremendous leaps from campaigns to provide instruction in the technical skills

of reading and writing to literacy as the source of independent, critical, and constructive thought processes" (1987b:50).

Twentieth century scholarship has provided the theoretical bases for many of the previously unsupported claims which had been advanced by nineteenth century schools promoters. These have underpinned conceptualizations of literacy and have influenced increasing expenditures on education for most of the twentieth century. The beliefs and assumptions—now grounded in social theory, psychology and linguistics—continue to be articulated in both popular discourse and official policy making as well as in programmatic responses to adult undereducation. However, it has been the application of these assumptions to economic theory which has given them their greatest influence. From the early 1960s, the presumed economic spinoffs of literacy's cognitive and psychosocial impacts have eclipsed all other postulated benefits of literacy and schooling. The renewal and elaboration of the theory of human capital by economists such as Schultz (1961), Becker (1962), and Denison (1971) placed education at the centre of a range of 'investments' which could increase the value of the human 'capital good'.[21] The ascendency of human capital theory in academic and policy circles in the 1960s, and the role of international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in disseminating the ideas, inevitably led to a connection being drawn between illiteracy—and specifically *adult* illiteracy in industrialized countries—and human capital deficit. This was

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[21] As Wilson and Woock (1995) note, the notion of human capital has its origin in slavery. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, marked the modern origin of the theory. Smith defined human capital as "the acquired and useful abilities of all the inhabitants or members of this society. ... The improved dexterity of a workman may be considered in the same light as a machine or instrument of trade which facilitates and abridges labour in which, though it costs a certain expense, repays that expense with a profit" (in Wilson and Woock, 1995:8).

particularly true of the United States, where human capital theory was especially influential.[22] But the concept of human capital also dominated development theory in this period and, ultimately, dictated United Nations literacy policy (Coombs, 1985). Mark Blaug, an economist of education, specifically argued that adult literacy programmes could contribute to economic development through, among other means, directly raising the productivity of new literates as well as those working in association with (new) literates—what he refers to as the 'spillover benefits' of literacy. He advocated a rigorous study of the impact of adult literacy on productivity[23] and himself attempted a cost:benefit analysis of adult literacy education relative to school education in order to determine whether "educational planners in poor countries should allocate part of their scarce resources to adult literacy programs" (1966:414-415). While admitting a dearth of reliable evidence, he, nevertheless, concluded that the economic benefits of schooling probably exceeded those of adult literacy and that the main rationale for investing in adult literacy was the "short period of production of a new literate" (ibid).

The primacy of human capital as a rationale for investing in adult literacy has been evidenced in the vast majority of literacy campaigns and programmes in the twentieth century. While, in both developing and industrialized countries, public discourse has professed literacy's connections to democracy and social progress, adult literacy

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[22] One of the strongest official manifestations of faith in the human capital theory was the Johnson administration's declaration, in 1964, of an 'educational war on poverty' (Silver and Silver, 1991).

[23] Unesco's Experimental World Literacy Program, conducted in eleven countries from 1967 to 1973, would become that study (Blaug, 1966:401).

programmes have only received meaningful support when they have been propelled by human capital objectives.[24]

Current research and the revision of conceptions of literacy Traditional conceptualizations of literacy and illiteracy have continued to characterize both public discourse and public policy making into the late twentieth century. As has already been noted, the claims of current literacy campaigners bear an extraordinary resemblance to those put forward by Horace Mann and James Kay Shuttleworth in North America and England in the 1840s. Official reports, academic treatments and media accounts vary little in their presentation of the issue. Literacy and illiteracy continue to be presented as diametrically opposed conditions. As Graff notes, individuals classed as 'literate'—irrespective of their level of literacy skills—are assumed to possess a "range of personal, cultural, and communicative characteristics" in common with other 'literates', regardless of the distance which separates them (1987b:374). Those who are presumed 'illiterate' are similarly categorized without regard to the vast differences which may separate their capabilities, and they continue to be stereotyped as negatively as any nineteenth century social reformer's or schools promoter's depictions. Simplistic correlations (between illiteracy and criminality, for example) are used exactly as they were used more than a century ago. Cliched—and erroneous—representations of the so-called 'illiterate' individual remain the norm.

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[24] The American and Canadian investments in adult literacy through 'manpower' development legislation in the 1960s are among the most obvious examples of this; so, too, is the United Nations Experimental World Literacy Program. The temporary eclipse of human capital theory, beginning in the 1970s, saw state investments in adult literacy programmes significantly cut. With the return to prominence of a revised human capital formulation in the mid-1980s, a new period of adult literacy campaigning emerged, accompanied by a form of funding support consistent with what Wilson and Woock (1995) identify as the new interpretation of human capital theory—the increased role of private financing of human capital investment.

Within the academic sphere, however, such conceptualizations no longer maintain their hegemony. Over the last three decades, several scholars have presented revisionist critical theories which challenge the orthodoxy. Several historical analyses of literacy and illiteracy have specifically questioned the literacy:modernization linkages (see, for example, Graff, 1979, 1987a; Sanderson, 1967; Schofield, 1968). Other studies have critically investigated the conventional assumptions relating to the cognitive, affective and behavioural consequences of literacy (see, for example, Scribner and Cole, 1981; Gough, 1968; Street, 1984; Marvin, 1988). The general conclusion of this body of critical research is that claims for literacy's impacts lack an adequate empirical base and are supported by many obviously erroneous assumptions.

The central assumption which has been challenged by recent critical scholarship is what Gough (1968) and Street (1984) refer to as 'literacy determinism'—the notion that the acquisition and use of literacy inevitably leads to certain preordained effects in the personal, social, political and economic realms. In general, the anthropological studies cited above (Goody, Havelock, Ong) presume literacy to be a central (and independent) factor in a range of developments including, for example, psychological individualism and the bureaucratic state. Variations in the level and character of literacy skills attained and in the contexts in which those skills are acquired and utilized do not substantially figure into these analyses. On the contrary, such interpretations rest on a view of literacy as a neutral (and fundamentally similar) set of skills which operate independently of social context.

Several recent critiques have contrasted this 'autonomous' conception of literacy with an 'ideological' conception—one which recognizes that the "skills and concepts

that accompany literacy acquisition, in whatever form, do not stem in some automatic way from the inherent qualities of literacy ... but are aspects of a specific ideology" (Street, 1984:1). As Street astutely observes, "faith in the power and qualities of literacy is itself socially learnt and is not an adequate tool with which to embark on a description of its practice" (ibid). The historical works of Graff (1979, 1987a), Donald (1983), Johnson (1976) and Simon (1987) on the spread of literacy in North America and England confirm the dominance of the ideological function(s) of literacy as an impetus for its diffusion. The historical evidence, in fact, reveals that the very presentation of literacy as a set of (neutral) technical skills was an important element in ruling class strategies to control the masses through education (Donald, 1983; Graff, 1979). Though literacy was presented to the working classes as the means through which they could transcend social and economic barriers and overcome poverty and disadvantage, the techniques used to transmit literacy skills, the social contexts in which they were learned and the content in which they were embedded were calculated, above all, to serve the objectives of the ruling classes. To represent the process of literacy acquisition in such a context as leading to the development of logical and critical facilities is fundamentally misleading.

Recent critical theories call for a general reevaluation of the significance of literacy to the full range of developments with which it has traditionally been associated. With respect to the individual cognitive impacts of literacy, for example, recent critical theorists have drawn three principal conclusions. The first of these is that literacy represents not a single set of skills and abilities but a potentially enormous range. As Graff observes, reports by psychologists and learning specialists reinforce

the conclusion that "critical powers are developed through hard effort and constant practice and their relationship to reading and writing is more ecological than casual" (1987b:56). Much also depends on exposure to ideas and access to information, both in the educational process and afterwards. As Arnove and Arboleda observe, "if illiteracy refers to the ability to understand the basic issues confronting individuals in contemporary society, then illiteracy is pervasive in many industrially advanced nations with extensive systems of education" (in Arnove and Graff, 1987:22).

The second revisionist conclusion relating to literacy's cognitive impacts is that the acquisition of the skills of reading and writing may or may not involve the development of abstract reasoning ability or critical facility and that these may, in any event, be cultivated in the absence of literacy skills. The work of psychologists Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole—who, in a study of the Vai people in Liberia, distinguished effects of schooled literacy and informally acquired literacy—points to the central importance of the *environment* in which literacy is acquired for its cognitive and psychological consequences. They concluded that the cognitive effects of schooling were distinct from the effects of literacy informally acquired and that literates who had acquired their literacy skills informally "were not significantly different from nonliterates on any of [the] cognitive measures" (Scribner and Cole, 1981, quoted in Graff, 1987b:24). Scribner and Cole's conclusions are endorsed by Carolyn Marvin who argues that "what are taken to be physical imperatives of texts may instead be the operation of variable social rules in the organization of literate practice" (1989:69). "Texts", she notes, "do not read themselves" (ibid).

The third conclusion which recent critical theorists have advanced with respect to literacy's cognitive impacts is that literacy need not significantly differ from illiteracy and that the contexts in which literacy skills are acquired and in which they are utilized crucially influence the nature of that literacy. Citing studies conducted in a number of locations, including East Pakistan and Columbia, Graff observes, for example, that literacy is not related to the "recognition of differing opinions among one's fellow men" and does not "correlate highly with media exposure (including print media)", a finding which, he notes, "suggests that literates do not read to a significant extent and that illiterates have access to information sources" (1979:7). In one of the studies cited, 48 percent of illiterates often bought newspapers and had them read to them. "Sources of information and new ideas", Graff observes, "are available to those without reading skills; and individuals, in fact, not the media, are considered the best sources of information" (ibid). With respect to the social and political impacts of literacy, several theorists have challenged the conventional associations between literacy and the development of particular political formations. Gough (1968), for example, has challenged the fundamental conservatism of Goody's analysis. As Street notes, she has argued that, "classes and the development of individualism" derive from "the division of labour and the relationship to the mode of production" rather than from the spread of literacy, as Goody maintained (1984:9). Variations in the nature and uses of literacy, she argued, "tend to spring from these arrangements rather than giving rise to them" (ibid).

Therborn has, similarly, challenged the conventional literacy:democracy link. One "striking *absence* in the history of bourgeois democracy", he observes, "is that of a

steady, peaceful process accompanying the development of wealth, literacy and urbanization" (1977:19, emphasis added). In his interpretation, although wealth, literacy and urbanization are factors which "bear upon the relationship of forces in the class struggle", they have not acted as causal agents of the development of democracy in the way which traditional sociological interpretation of the correlation might suggest.[25] In fact, as Therborn notes, literacy (together with property, income, and occupation) has been one of the criteria by which people have been excluded from the franchise by *class* (ibid:36 emphasis added). This has been particularly true of the United States which, as previously noted, has used a literacy criterion manipulatively to restrict enfranchisement of black and immigrant populations (Therborn, 1977; Levine, 1986). The history of the development of literacy demonstrates that high levels of literacy can co-exist with very undemocratic social and political organization, including widespread exclusion of literate sectors of the population from the suffrage. In virtually all western industrialized countries, enfranchisement for women lagged decades behind the universal enfranchisement of men, in spite of the fact that literacy levels were more or less equal.[26]

Graff concurs that there is little empirical evidence of literacy's 'liberating' or 'revolutionary' consequences—that, in fact, there are "better reasons to expect the opposite to be more often the case" (1987b:24). The control functions of literacy, he

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[25] Sweden, Scotland, and Germany (Prussia) all had high levels of literacy (enforced by religious campaigns) centuries before the achievement of democracy in these countries (Arnove and Graff, 1987). Therborn's work on the rise of democracy in capitalist countries points to stronger correlations than the literacy/democracycoincidence. These include national mobilization against external threat, divisions in the ruling classes and the development of capitalism itself. As he notes, "Bourgeois democracy has been attained by diverse and tortuous routes ..." (1977:28).

[26] In Switzerland, for example, women did not gain the right to vote until 1971 (Therborn, 1977:37).

notes, have predominated in spite of conceptions of literacy as autonomous. This position is supported by Marvin who theorizes that "the effects of popular literacy may have less to do with shifts in cognition than with a re-positioning of the yoke of obedience from local to remote authority" (1988:71).

Although both industrialized and developing countries have aspired to eradicate illiteracy as a means of solving a range of social problems (including poverty and unemployment), as several studies have recently demonstrated, history does not support the thesis that a wider distribution of literacy skills necessarily has a positive impact on either economic development or individual material prosperity. On the contrary, as Graff observes, although by the middle of the twentieth century literacy rates had increased substantially and gaps between nations were decreasing, "nowhere ... did ever-rising literacy levels result in fundamental changes for nations, societies, or individuals. Poor persons and poor nations largely remained poor, and other gaps—geographic, social, and age and gender-related—persisted" (1987a:374-5). Drawing on a range of evidence including early industrial England and nineteenth century Ontario, Graff has demonstrated that social and economic development are more likely (though not inevitably) *causes* of the spread of literacy rather than its effects (1979, 1987). With respect to literacy and development in the Third World, Street has challenged the notion of a 40 percent literacy threshold, advanced by Anderson (1966) and Blaug (1966). He notes that the proposition is meaningless in the absence of a clear definition of the "specific literacy practices and concepts 40% of the population are supposed to acquire". Comparative studies, he observes, demonstrate "that such practices and conceptions are very different from one culture

to another" (1984:2). Educational systems did, of course, expand dramatically (if unevenly) in developing countries through the 1960s and early 1970s, as they had done in industrialized countries—and with not dissimilar results. For what became clear was that, unless meaningful economic development precedes—or at least accompanies—educational expansion, education is powerless to effect change and may, in fact, exacerbate problems as people move away from traditional occupations and glut the relatively small markets for educated labour (Coombs, 1985).

CONCLUSION

In less than two centuries, the prevailing (ruling class) view of mass literacy has shifted from fear of its potential to foster social upheaval, and active opposition to its spread, to an endorsement of the absolute necessity of an increasingly high standard of literacy for every member of society—in effect a 'literacy imperative'. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the widespread attribution to literacy of the power to transform individuals and society led both scholarly and popular opinion inevitably to its corollary—the belief that the lack of literacy skills (in individuals and societies) is responsible for lack of social development and economic progress. This belief persists in the late twentieth century, in spite of the recent academic revisiting of the myths surrounding literacy. For, although scholars have found little consistency in the research supporting claims for literacy's centrality, and several have established the invalidity of some of the key claims, these claims continue to provide the basis for the majority of current debates, practices and policy initiatives relating to literacy in both developing and industrialized countries.

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that, contrary to the widespread conviction that expanded access to literacy has unequivocally improved the condition of working class life, literacy's benefits are neither direct nor inevitable. On the contrary, an examination of its history and uses reveals that literacy can and does operate as an instrument of restriction, control and exclusion and as both a mechanism for, and a justification of, the unequal distribution of the benefits of economic development.

Part II

Constructing a 'Crisis' of Worker Literacy

Chapter 3

A Crisis of Worker Literacy
The Making of an Issue in the 1980s

> *"We have to make people believe that literacy means a lot more than merely reading Byron, Shelly and Keats! It has to do with why our cars are often not well-made, and why so many people take sick leave!"*[1]

INTRODUCTION

Literacy has been the focus of a renewed and particularly intensive attention for much of the last three decades. In North America, it has become the subject of political debate and a rallying point for educational reform. Public concern about falling educational standards and rising illiteracy has also been the backdrop for increasing corporate influence and control over education. Claims ranging from declining test scores in schools, to falling standards of performance among university graduates, to skill deficiencies in the labour market are regularly invoked to declare a 'crisis of literacy' (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Calamai, 1987; Kirsch, Jungeblut and Campbell, 1992; Statistics Canada et al. 1995). Similarly, in Britain, allegedly falling standards as evidenced in reading test score declines and in recently instituted performance tests measures have provided the basis for more than two decades of educational reforms including a retreat from comprehensive education and a general trend towards increasing selectivity and disparity (Chitty, 1993; Simon, 1988; Wolpe and Donald, 1983; Wright, 1977).

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[1] Peter Gzowski (quoted in Ontario Ministry of Industry, Trade and Technology, 1991:10).

Adult illiteracy, though a relatively minor component of the general 'crisis of literacy', has periodically since the mid 1970s taken front and centre stage among the serious issues of the day. In mid-1970s Britain, for example, decades of indifference to the issue of adult illiteracy became transformed virtually overnight into a national media campaign which saw tens of thousands volunteer to tutor the supposed illiterate and an even greater number come forward for tuition.[2] And, although the issue would fade from public consciousness as quickly as it had appeared in Britain, by the early 1980s it was gaining renewed attention in North America; by the end of that decade, adult illiteracy had become a central social issue in both Canada and the United States. A 1990 Canadian public opinion poll, for example, ranked illiteracy third in importance after unemployment and the environment as a major national problem (ABC Canada, 1990). And, as Fox and Baker noted in 1990, "One would have to be totally tuned out of current events to not know that illiteracy is one of the United States' major ills, sharing top billing with homelessness, child abuse and drugs" (1990:83).

According to a range of academic, official and popular sources in Canada and the United States, between 15 and 40 percent of the adult populations of both countries are illiterate or have serious literacy problems (see, for example, Hunter and Harman, 1979; Calamai, 1987; Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins and Kolstad, 1993; Statistics Canada et al., 1995). The proportion of British adults who have literacy problems has been much more conservatively estimated at between 0.5 and 13 percent of the adult

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[2] Street (1984), Clare (1985) and Withnall (1994) provide critical accounts of the 1975-77 literacy campaign in Britain. Of the three, Clare provides the most comprehensive analysis. There has not been an analysis of the campaign from the perspective of its "social construction", however. In most respects, that construction was similar to the 1980s campaign in the United States (and the parallel campaign in Canada), though the agencies of construction differed.

population (BAS, 1974; Longley, 1975; Hamilton and Stasinopoulis, 1987; Kempa, 1993). In North America, the latest illiteracy studies and statistics warrant regular stories in local media and major stories in the mainstream press and electronic media.[3] The literacy surveys are the subject of debate and analysis in educational journals.[4] They are also regularly cited in trade and interest group publications.[5]

Invoking the Spectre of Human Capital Decline In 1988, a popular American business publication, *Business Week*, presented a dramatic picture of the threat which adult illiteracy posed to the competitive position of the United States internationally: "Take a trip back to what may be our future," the article exhorted. "It is the 1851 industrial exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London. Britain is the dominant world power. The U.S. is No. 2 in industry and catching up fast. Made-in-America reapers, muskets, and tools are the marvels of the show. British businessmen are amazed at what they see. Products are assembled from completely interchangeable parts. Here is true mass production for the first time. ... Worried delegations of British industrialists set sail to investigate. Their findings? American manufacturing prowess is in large part due to a highly educated work force. The Yankees have an astonishingly high

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[3] Including, for example, *The Wall Street Journal* (Hymowitz, 1981); *Newsweek, 1984* (quoted in Kozol, 1985:8); *Time* (Gorman, 1988); *Business Week* (Ehrlich and Garland, 1988; Nussbaum, 1988); *Toronto Star* (Trickey, 1988; Gorrie, 1989); *The Globe and Mail* (Gibb-Clark, 1990); *Canadian Business* (Allan,1991). The publication of the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey in the United States made the front pages of dozens of newspapers including the *New York Times* and *USA Today* . It was featured on the Phil Donahue television talk show where "an hour of prime time television [was devoted] to discussing the problem" (*Adult and Continuing Education Today*, 1993).

[4] Including, for example, *Journal of Reading* (Fagan, 1995); *Lifelong Learning* (Kazemek, 1995); *Adult Learning* (Wagner, 1993); and *Harvard Educational Review* (Levine, 1982).

[5] Including, for example, *Training* (Lee, 1988; Zemke, 1989); *Training and Development Journal* (Dunn-Rankin and Bell, 1990); *Management World* (Goddard, 1989); and *HR Focus* (Jenner, 1994.)

literacy rate of 90% among the free population. In the industrial heartland of New England, 95% of adults read and write. In contrast, just two-thirds of the people in Britain are literate." The reader is then asked to "zip ahead a century or so to the 1980s," when the United States "is the dominant world power, and it is Japan that is No. 2 and closing fast. American CEOs marvel at the quality of Japanese products flooding their markets. They make pilgrimages to Tokyo. Their findings? Manufacturing superiority is being forfeited to the Japanese. And yes, once again, behind the success in manufacturing prowess lies a better-educated work force. In 1988, Japan's functional literacy rate is better than 95%. In America it's down to about 80%" (Nussbaum, 1988:100).

By the mid 1980s, such presentations were not uncommon in the United States. The focus of literacy campaigning, and of a high proportion of adult literacy activity in North America had clearly shifted to the supposed literacy deficits of the national workforces. Illiteracy, in previous periods associated with a range of psycho-social and economic problems including dependency on the state, in the 1980s began to be identified as a direct cause of relative national industrial decline and loss of international competitiveness (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Kozol, 1985; Skagen, 1986; Chisman, 1989; Georgetti, 1992). In North America, adult illiteracy, which had throughout the 1970s occupied an increasingly marginal place in both public policy and public consciousness, became in the relatively short span of the early 1980s a central public issue and the focus of nationwide campaigns. And, in both the United States and Canada, the issue had by the mid-1980s become defined almost exclusively as a labour supply issue. In the same period in England, there was

a parallel shift among adult literacy advocates and policy makers from the pursuit of increased general literacy opportunities to a more explicit labour and workplace orientation.

While the impact of illiteracy on workers and work had featured in previous campaigns—and, indeed, a human capital rationale had driven the entire investment in adult basic education in Canada and the United States in the 1960s and 1970s—the 1980s campaigning focus on workers nonetheless marked a qualitative shift from earlier campaigns. Specially commissioned surveys and reports in the period provided 'empirical' evidence that worker illiteracy hampered individual and national productivity, endangered health and safety in the workplace and in myriad other ways impeded economic progress (see, for example, CBTFL, 1988a; DesLauriers, 1990; Drouin, 1990). 'Workforce (and workplace) literacy' provided the theme for local, regional and national conferences and workshops involving business, educationalists, and public policy makers; a new professional specialism in 'workplace literacy' rapidly developed, supported primarily with public funding and dedicated to uncovering workplace illiteracy and applying new and specially developed educational solutions. Overnight, the illiterate worker would become a new scapegoat for many of the economic (and attendant social) problems facing nations (Hymowitz, 1981; Kozol, 1985; Ehrlich and Garland, 1988).

This chapter examines the 1980s shift in literacy campaigning in North America and in the adult literacy service in England away from the more general working class focus (variously targeted in past campaigning as the poor, the unemployed or underemployed, immigrants or native-born minorities) to a specific focus on the supposed

illiteracy of workers. The evidence presented here suggests that workforce illiteracy is a social issue which has been expressly constructed. It is argued that the 'problem' has been constructed in part by professional and voluntary organizations seeking, in the face of diminishing public and official attention to adult illiteracy, to establish areas of need and expertise in order to extend their own legitimacy; in part—and, in the United States, primarily—by the politicized arm of the corporate sector seeking to extend corporate control over public education, to identify the specific (training) needs of business with the national interest, and to create a social climate generally 'friendlier' to capital; and, in part, by conservative governments seeking to carry out neo-liberal agendas which have included a market approach to the provision of training and regressive educational and social reforms. These groups, it is argued, have acted, both separately and together, to build the case for a crisis of worker illiteracy and to argue for the necessity of a range of interventions to address the crisis—interventions ranging from the ameliorative to the punitive.

As the campaign to create a serious public issue of worker illiteracy was initiated in the United States and from there spread—albeit with markedly differing degrees of success—to both Canada and England, particular attention is given in this chapter to the American context and the construction in that country of a crisis of worker illiteracy. As this chapter documents, Canada experienced a workplace literacy campaign more or less parallel to that of the United States—and, indeed, Canada has been subject to the American campaign itself. In England, though there have been similar attempts to stimulate public and corporate interest in the issue, these have been pursued in the absence of a broader based literacy campaign.

AMERICAN LITERACY CAMPAIGNING IN THE 1980S

The United States in the 1980s was the site of an aggressive adult literacy campaign, arguably the most extensive such campaign ever waged in its history or in the history of any western industrialized, and overwhelmingly 'literate', nation. Yet, until 1983-84 there had been little to indicate that adult illiteracy would soon become a major national issue. Early 1980s literacy initiatives were both sporadic and isolated—either remnants of the 1970s federal Right to Read initiative or manifestations of the more general educational reform movement which was gathering momentum in this period.[6] The late 1970s and early 1980s had, in fact, marked a period of distinct decline in interest in the issue of adult illiteracy. The beginning of the 1980s also saw the threat of real diminution in adult literacy provision as funding for the federal Adult Basic Education programme—a substantial proportion of all funding for literacy education in the country—was frozen at 1981 levels and cuts were anticipated (Kozol, 1985). The announcement of two national literacy initiatives in 1983 signalled the end of this period of relative obscurity for the literacy issue, though it would be several years before the renewed attention to the issue was translated into increased funding support for literacy provision. The 1981 federal funding freeze would remain in effect until mid-decade and several of the larger states would actually be subjected to funding cuts.

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[6] Examples included statewide reading campaigns such as that initiated in South Carolina in 1980, the Assault on Illiteracy Program, a self-help initiative to combat illiteracy among disadvantaged populations, also established in 1980, and the Minnesota Literacy Council's 1980 formation of Literacy '85, a five year plan for literacy.

The first national initiative, a federal government undertaking, was announced by then President Ronald Reagan and his Secretary of Education in September 1983. Named the Secretary's Initiative on Literacy, its primary objectives supported the Reagan administration's intention of lessening the role of the federal government in education; they included the increased involvement of both the states and the private sector in organizing and funding literacy education and the extension of the use of volunteers in its delivery. The second initiative was a national literacy campaign started by business and joined by the country's major voluntary and statutory literacy organizations. The private sector initiative was to become by far the more influential of the two; the federal government initiative, with significantly less funding, would merely play a supporting role.

The nation organizes around the literacy issue For nearly a decade following the announcement of these two national literacy initiatives, adult illiteracy gained increasing attention at all jurisdictional levels. Statewide literacy organizations—variously named networks, coalitions, councils and commissions—sprang up at an extraordinary rate. An estimated three-fifths of the states had established such adult literacy planning bodies by 1987 (BCEL, No. 14, January 1988:8). By 1991, the number had grown to forty states and several states had also joined together to form inter-state literacy networks (BCEL, No. 27, April 1991:7) In addition to such planning bodies, the majority of states undertook a range of literacy-related activities including statewide campaigns, literacy telephone referral systems (generally called 'literacy hotlines'), task

forces, adult population literacy surveys, and annual conferences and forums. A few states also drafted specific literacy legislation.

Organization around the literacy issue also took place at the national level. Literacy task forces, for example, were established by the U.S. Conference of Mayors (1985), the National Governors Association (1987), and the American Hospital Association (1990); and, in the mid-1980s, the Education Commission of the States undertook a national literacy project.

A number of literacy initiatives were also undertaken or supported by federal government departments, including national conferences on state literacy initiatives, sponsored in part by the federal departments of Education and Labour. National literacy surveys were conducted, including a national survey of 'job seekers' served by the U.S. Department of Labour, funded by Congress (Kirsch, Jungeblut and Campbell, 1992), and a Department of Education survey of the literacy skills of the general adult population, the National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins and Kolstad, 1993). A bipartisan Congressional task force on illiteracy was established in 1987 and at least one Congressional caucus (the Sunbelt Caucus) established its own task force as well. Five new literacy bills were introduced into Congress in 1987 and, in each of the following years until the passing of a National Literacy Act in 1991, more new bills were added.

Many of the state and national literacy activities and events were replicated at the municipal level as well. Mayors' Commissions and citywide task forces were established, for example. By 1987, eighteen major cities had established citywide literacy planning mechanisms (BCEL, No. 14, January 1988:8). In some cases, citywide

literacy campaigns were initiated, perhaps most notably the New York City literacy campaign which allocated $35 million for literacy over a four-year period from 1984.

Media dominates literacy campaign The dominant feature of the 1980s American campaign, however, was not this extraordinary increase in literacy-related organization, but the central role of the media. The centrepiece of the private sector National Literacy Campaign was a national advertising campaign, launched in late 1984. Over the nearly three years of its duration, the advertising campaign made use of television and radio, newspapers and magazines, as well as posters and billboards to persuade Americans that adult illiteracy was rampant and that only mass mobilization of the literate population to fight the problem could curb its debilitating impact on the moral, social and economic life of the nation. Just five months from the start of the advertising campaign, 501 newspapers had printed one or more advertisements; in the first two years of the campaign, public service literacy advertisements had also run in 160 magazines. Advertising in all media, including radio and television, represented about $8 million in space and/or time by October 1986 (BCEL, No. 9, October 1986:2).

One year into the advertising operation, the National Literacy Campaign escalated significantly when two of the country's main national communications networks, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and the private American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), announced a cooperative venture, Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS). The PLUS campaign would combine national network broadcasts on both television and radio with a range of community activities, focused on "alerting the public to the urgency of the adult illiteracy problem and helping to mobilize efforts to deal with it in towns and

cities across the U.S." (BCEL, No. 8, July 1986:1). All 525 affiliate and member stations of ABC and PBS would take part in the campaign (ibid).

The broadcasting component of the PLUS campaign involved not only special literacy-focused programming—much of it in prime time slots—but also the incorporation of the literacy issue into dramatic programming and other entertainment productions. In addition to the national network productions, documentary films on illiteracy were produced in several states and broadcast on both public and commercial television; and local and regional television programming regularly incorporated the illiteracy issue. National Public Radio was also a participant in the PLUS campaign and, in 1986, for example, aired a documentary series on literacy over 300 public radio stations.

Press coverage of the literacy issue also began to increase with the entry of the print and print-related industries into literacy campaigning in 1985. When the American Newspaper Publishers Association embarked on a literacy awareness campaign to coincide with the PLUS broadcast and community events schedule in 1987, the level of coverage increased dramatically. Feature articles on the subject of illiteracy began to appear in all the country's major newspapers and magazines, and syndicated articles were printed nationwide in local newspapers. In addition to the nationally syndicated material, local newspapers also produced their own items on the issue. Profiles of 'illiterates' including shock/horror stories, documentation of the social and economic costs of illiteracy, and 'success stories' featuring local literacy programmes and tutoring schemes—all became regular fare for newspaper and magazine readers across the country.

Literacy campaign takes on the character of a moral crusade The entire 1980s literacy campaign resembled a moral crusade in many respects. President Reagan had declared September 7, 1986 'Literacy Sunday', for example, and churches were asked to preach the 'literacy message' from the pulpit. The National Council of the Churches of Christ (U.S. and Canadian) held a conference on the church's involvement in literacy in 1987. The General Federation of Women's Clubs published guidelines for its 500,000 U.S. member volunteers in 1985, entitled 'Action for Literacy'. In the same year, the Rotary International Board announced a ten-year emphasis on literacy, called 'Hope for Reading'. Barbara Bush, wife of then Vice-President, George Bush, adopted literacy as her special cause and, by 1988, was hosting annual national literacy honours events at the White House. When George Bush became President, the annual literacy honours were hosted by both the president and his wife and broadcast from the White House on commercial television.

Literacy tuition came to be seen, not as a necessary service unavailable to hundreds of thousands of Americans, but as a kind of therapy for what was increasingly presented as a moral and intellectual void. In 1986, the governor of Virginia announced a "No reading, no release" parole policy for all Virginia inmates (Marcus, 1986). Several states followed suit with the institution of mandatory basic education for prison inmates. The federal government had itself instituted mandatory basic education for all prisoners with less than a grade six level of education in 1982. Over the following decade, the federal standard for mandatory attendance would be raised twice—first to eighth grade and, in May 1991, to twelfth grade (BCEL, No. 29, October 1991:4).

New federal funding allocations for literacy in the late 1980s included specially targeted funding for 'family literacy' and literacy for the homeless. From 1987-88, welfare legislation also began to be reshaped throughout the country and, in several states, welfare eligibility came to be tied to literacy assessment. In the search for literacy tutoring opportunities, captive constituencies were found at, among other places, alcohol and drug treatment facilities (see, for example, BCEL, No. 32, July 1992:4).

The campaign used well-known entertainers to get the message across. Television talk show host, Oprah Winfrey, hosted a three-hour prime time show on literacy in 1987, for example. Film stars Johnny Cash, Dennis Weaver, Jane Fonda and Robert DeNiro all acted in films which dramatized the plight of illiterates. Country music singer and film star, Dolly Parton, became the national chairperson of a private sector literacy fund-raising campaign. And, in 1992 the Country Music Association initiated a national literacy awareness campaign featuring popular entertainers doing radio public service announcements.

'Illiterates' or 'former illiterates' were also drawn into the public awareness and fund raising campaigns and were frequently called upon to give public testimonials. A General Motors employee, and member of the United Auto Workers, embarked on a speaking tour of the country, sharing his experiences as an illiterate worker (Caster, 1991). A San Diego, California, literacy student walked across the country to Washington, D.C. in aid of literacy (BCEL, No. 28, July 1991). Yet another student embarked on a cross-country roller skating tour from California to Florida to raise awareness (and funds) for literacy (BCEL, No. 23 April 1990).

The literacy message was carried on grocery bags and promoted through a range of events including golf tournaments and celebrity galas. A wide variety of commercial products—including coffee, cheques, credit cards, comic books and gasoline—was promoted through the promise of a donation to the literacy cause for every purchase. Churches, supermarkets, union halls and employers all exhorted the 'illiterate' to seek help; the 'literate' to provide the help. Some states added literacy to the causes to which taxpayers could contribute directly through a tax checkoff process. Some companies offered a payroll deduction service for employees who wanted to contribute to the literacy cause; others encouraged their employees to volunteer as literacy tutors (usually in their free time); some made their cafeterias available after business hours as literacy tutoring sites. When the U.S. Postmaster General initiated a 'Stamp out Illiteracy' campaign in 1990, for example, post offices were made available as tutoring spaces; postal workers as literacy tutors.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE LITERACY CAMPAIGN: EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND BUSINESS ACTIVISM

Two key trends may be seen to have influenced both the development and the direction of the renewed, and greatly intensified, period of literacy campaigning which began in the early 1980s in the United States. These were, on the one hand, the political ascendance of the New Right with its related agendas of educational reform, reduced state expenditures on social programmes, and an increased role for corporate interests in public policy formation and, on the other hand, the increased social and political activism of the business class itself in the pursuit of its own interests.

The New Right and educational reform At the beginning of the 1980s, educational reform was at the centre of the conservative political agenda in the United States. Education had been under increasing pressure at all jurisdictional levels from the mid 1970s. State and local funding for education had been cut in many regions as the tax base deteriorated under recessionary economic conditions and conservative taxation policies. Nationally, spending on everything from infrastructure to school textbooks had declined dramatically over the previous decade. In some extreme instances, school boards had been forced to declare bankruptcy (Useem, 1986; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

In the midst of these crises, the conservative Reagan administration took office in 1980 with the express intention of reducing the federal role in education—a role which had historically been critical to the establishment and maintenance of programmes designed to equalize the fundamental inequalities of a system substantially funded out of local property taxes and without national standards. Such programmes include several initiated during the 1960s War on Poverty, among them the Adult Basic Education programme for undereducated and non-English speaking American adults. Not only were these programmes threatened in the early 1980s, but the downgrading (from cabinet level) of the federal Department of Education itself—and, through this, the reduction of the public education lobby—was being considered (Shapiro, 1985).

A number of educational reform documents were produced in this period, several of them commissioned by the federal government.[7] The core of most of these documents

[7] The report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, for example, was commissioned in 1981; that of the National Advisory Council on Adult Education was commissioned in 1983.

was a call for a return to the halcyon days when students purportedly progressed according to their merit, and when high school diplomas marked the end of a continuing process of rigorous assessment and selection, and signalled the attainment of a body of relevant and useful knowledge and skills. What was identified as the corrupter of this ideal state was the gradual adoption of an egalitarian ethic which, though ostensibly intended to advantage the 'disadvantaged', had, reformers argued, worked to render education less valuable to everyone, including the disadvantaged. Social, rather than academic, objectives were said to be ruling the educational system. The claim that thousands of high school students could not read their diplomas, initially a conscious overstatement of the 'problem', eventually came to be accepted as literal truth and to influence directly the implementation of state policies for school leaving criteria (U.S. Department of Education, 1984).

The most influential education reform document of the period, announced with great fanfare by President Ronald Reagan, was the 1983 report of a National Commission on Excellence in Education. The title itself, *A Nation at Risk*, exhibited the tendency towards overstatement which characterized the entire document—and, indeed, the period. It charged that America's educational system had become soft—at best, offering the false illusion of achievement to an increasingly large proportion of the population; at worst, threatening the social and economic fabric and, indeed, the very security of the nation. "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today," the report asserted, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983:5). The *New York Times* reported, on the publication of *A Nation*

at Risk, that the National Commission on Excellence in Education had "brought the issue [of education] to the forefront of political debate with an urgency not felt since the Soviet satellite shook American confidence in its public schools in 1957" (quoted in U.S. Department of Education, 1984:11).

The response to calls for educational reform was swift. Less than one year after the report of the National Commission, the U.S. Department of Education published a summary of reforms—achieved or in progress—in each of the fifty states and the District of Columbia. Entitled *A Nation Responds: Recent Efforts to Improve Education*, the 1984 report documented a broad sweep of reforms, several of which were common to the majority of states. In general, the reforms sought to increase the selection function of schooling through the institution of more rigorous academic requirements and the increased use of standardized testing (ibid).

Business Activism At the forefront of educational reform efforts were business associations, corporate philanthropic divisions and foundations, and a plethora of new 'corporate citizens'—the chief executive officers (CEOs) of some of America's largest corporations. Corporate strategy involved a wide range of interventions in both the politics and implementation of educational reform—from the participation of corporate CEOs on educational committees and boards to the structured incorporation of employers in educational programmes (Useem, 1986).

Whereas in the past business funding of educational institutions and endeavours had largely concentrated on universities, during the 1980s elementary and secondary education were also targeted. A central platform of the educational reform which

business pursued was the extension of business practices into the organization and management of schools and the revision of the curriculum to meet the self-defined needs of business and industry. *A Nation Responds* (1984) documented extensive business involvement in state school reforms. In the District of Columbia, for example, a consortium of major corporations had established a management institute to "help principals and administrators improve their school management skills". The California Business Roundtable had commissioned its own study of how that state's public schools could be "improved" and had "vigorously supported" State reform legislation. In Los Angeles alone, over 200 employers had "adopted" schools, providing "tutoring, counselling, field trips, guest speakers", and "summer jobs for students and faculty". More than 400,000 business representatives were then serving on almost 40,000 vocational education advisory councils (U.S. Department of Education, 1984:18). And these initiatives were in addition to the work of corporate foundations. Philanthropic commitment to "improving education" had, the report noted, "intensified in the aftermath of the studies". Carnegie and Ford continued their decades-old contributions to educational reform but they were joined by a number of other large foundations and "an estimated 350 [recently established] local foundations" (ibid:19). The trend was to continue throughout the decade and, as Craig Smith notes, by the early 1990s, 15 percent of corporate cash gifts were going to school reform; he cites a study which estimated that at least one third of U.S. school districts had partnerships with business in this period (1994:109).

The dominant role of business interests in educational reform reflected a key feature of New Right politics, the visible participation of business at the centre of the public

policy process. What has been called the 'business activist' movement in the United States had begun formally with the 1970s establishment of the Business Roundtable, a lobbying organization which included the top officers of most of the major American corporations. As Sharon Smith has observed, at the beginning of the 1981 recession the "employers' offensive" had taken a "qualitative leap" and the Business Roundtable was actively engaged in "shaping the policies of Reaganism" (1992:12) What followed was a period of intense and aggressive business 'activism', aimed at securing a central place for business in public policy making and a direct role in the administration and delivery of services.

BUSINESS CONSTRUCTS A LITERACY CAMPAIGN

The 1980s literacy campaign represents an aspect of educational reform in which business played not merely an important role but, in the United States in particular, *the* central organizing role. For the conservative media and many other corporate interests who were to become involved in active literacy campaigning, adult illiteracy provided the clear evidence that public schooling was not working; indeed, this would be among the chief uses of the illiteracy issue in the 1980s. The 'evidence' of widespread illiteracy was used, in particular, to discredit policies designed to reduce racial segregation and to ameliorate the disadvantages of poverty.[8] The National Advisory Council on Adult Education, for example, which reported on literacy to the President,

[8] There are clear parallels between such uses of the literacy 'crisis' in 1980s America and the conservative critique of education during the mid-1970s literacy campaign in Britain. There, conservatives such as Rhodes Boyson (1975) seized on literacy decline—starkly evidenced, they argued, in rampant adult illiteracy—as the centre of their attacks on 1960s educational reforms, including comprehensivization and what they termed 'progressive' education.

the Congress and the Secretary of Education in the mid-1980s, identified, among the chief factors contributing to failing schools and adult illiteracy: "progressive education"; federal regulations concerning a range of special issues including those relating to handicapped and disadvantaged students, adult basic education, desegregation, and bilingual education; "social promotion" and the lack of standards and discipline; and teachers' unions and the increasing influence of teachers in educational decision making (undated:2-3). The business lobby, in general, had little trouble identifying with this position. In fact, the National Advisory Council's report on literacy was produced by a six-member literacy committee, four of whom were affiliated with business. Well over half of the Presidentially appointed Council at the time of the literacy report represented corporate or small business interests.

Not only did adult illiteracy serve to reinforce the message that education was badly in need of reform; it was also an area of education which would prove relatively easy (and cheap) to 'partner' with. For, in spite of the fact that the federal government had been supporting adult literacy education for twenty years, it remained a very undeveloped and underfunded area of public education. The overwhelming majority of teachers in basic education were part-time, many working in adult basic education to supplement their day school salaries. Adult basic education programmes continued to occupy a marginal position in state and local educational organization. Facilities and resources were typically substandard and volunteer provision continued to be viewed as a legitimate approach to delivery—promoted by the very school boards and state departments which underfunded the formal Adult Basic Education sector (Hunter and Harman, 1979; Kozol, 1985; BCEL, No. 14, January 1988; Beder, 1991).

When business went looking for educational issues on which they could both claim expertise and give the appearance of making a substantial financial and organizational contribution, adult literacy and basic education was the arena in which they were least likely to meet with resistance; for it was an educational arena with few defenders. Perhaps more importantly, it was an area of education both starved of funds and—increasingly as the National Literacy Campaign proceeded—swamped with new demand.

Strategic philanthropy and the adult literacy campaign And 'looking for an issue' is exactly what many business interests were doing in the early 1980s. As insider Craig Smith has noted, business involvement in literacy was a direct outcome of one key aspect of business activism—what he terms a 'strategic' approach to philanthropic spending in America in the period. A former president of the Washington think tank, Corporate Citizen, and former publisher of *Corporate Philanthropy Report*, Smith described the new business approach to philanthropy in a 1994 article in the *Harvard Business Review*. Corporations, he noted, had shifted their strategy for giving away money; they were now pursuing "giving strategies" which "increase their name recognition among consumers, boost employee productivity, reduce R&D costs, [and] overcome regulatory obstacles" (1994:105).

Prior to the 1970s, American corporate involvement in social issues had been primarily effected through endowed, private foundations which had the appearance of independence and objectivity. Not only were companies now more directly and openly involved in social issues; there was also a significant change in the nature of their involvement. In contrast to previous corporate donation programmes which had

targeted "those [social issues] least associated with [the corporation's] line of business", corporate donors in the 1980s were directly targeting issues which had a direct relation to their business interests. They were, in the process, "emerging as important partners in movements for social change while advancing their business goals" (ibid:107).

As Smith has noted, one result of this new corporate strategy was to turn several 'fringe causes' into national movements (1994:106). Literacy was one such 'fringe cause' which, in large measure due to strategic business philanthropic spending, would achieve the status of a national movement. Crucially, the issue would be singled out as a favourite cause of both the print and broadcast media. For print media companies, including major newspapers (for example, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*), book publishers (McGraw-Hill and Prentice Hall, for example) and book sellers, the promotion of the literacy issue was undertaken, in part, as an attempt to halt declining readership. Broadcasters would see the promotion of the issue in part, as a means of "compensating for their [supposed] role in the decline of literacy"[9] (ibid).

B. Dalton Booksellers targets literacy Although it would not achieve national scope for several years, the literacy campaign which swept the United States in the 1980s can probably be said to have started in 1978 when B. Dalton Booksellers, the nation's largest book retail chain, "went in search of an important national issue to support" (BCEL, No. 3, April 1985:10). B. Dalton's parent company had allowed the book-

[9] Again, there are clear parallels with the use of the literacy campaign in Britain in the mid-1970s. In that case, the British Broadcasting Corporation became the central player in the orchestration of a national literacy campaign, at least in part as a public relations exercise (Richards, 1985; Clare, 1985).

seller to assume responsibility for its own philanthropic programme and, in line with the new corporate philanthropic strategy, its mandate became "to use the financial and human resources of the company for some public issue relating to its business" (ibid). Literacy would become that issue.

By 1981 adult illiteracy had, in fact, become the sole focus of B. Dalton's philanthropic spending and, in September 1983, the company allocated $3 million to fund a national literacy initiative—focused in particular on its key markets. B. Dalton's $3 million allocation for literacy was directly instrumental in the 1983 formation of a national literacy coalition, the Coalition for Literacy—a loose-knit organization which included the major literacy volunteer organizations, the federal Adult Basic Education programme, the American Library Association and, crucially, the B. Dalton company itself (Kozol, 1985).

Business leads National Literacy Campaign In 1983, shortly after its formation, the Coalition for Literacy announced the launch of a National Literacy Campaign. In spite of the nominal presence of a broad 'coalition', however, the initial funding for the national literacy campaign indicated the degree to which it was a corporate undertaking. Of the total start-up fund of $577,500, corporate donations accounted for all but $50,000, the amount granted by the federal Department of Education (BCEL, No. 1 September 1984:4). The character of the campaign itself also reflected the dominant role of business; it would become primarily an advertising campaign conducted by the private sector Advertising Council and coordinated by the vice-president of marketing communications for the International Paper Company (BCEL, No. 3, April 1985:6).

Indeed, prior to the launch of the 1983 National Literacy Campaign, the B. Dalton company's involvement with literacy in Minnesota—the home state of its corporate headquarters—had already resulted in the establishment of many campaign and organizing strategies which would later be replicated on a national scale. In 1980, for example, the Minnesota Literacy Council—with funding and leadership from the B. Dalton company—had launched a five-year literacy campaign centred on radio and television advertisements and a telephone referral service. B. Dalton's plan of action for its national literacy effort included many other features which would come to characterize corporate involvement in the literacy issue. Chief among these were the promotion of the growth of community-based and volunteer literacy programmes, the involvement of the company in the provision of "management and technical assistance to literacy programme operators", the participation of company employees as tutors in literacy programmes (in their own time), and the participation of company managers on the boards of literacy organizations (BCEL, No. 1, September 1984:11). As early as 1983, 27 of 40 regional managers of B. Dalton were serving on boards or advisory committees of local or state literacy organizations (ibid). Most corporations donating to the literacy cause over the decade would follow the B. Dalton example in this respect.

Business Council for Effective Literacy assumes business leadership in literacy campaign Although B. Dalton's early example would provide the model for much of business's involvement in literacy over the ensuing decade, it was the establishment of the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL) which assured an ongoing

central role for business in the American literacy campaign. The BCEL was founded in 1983 by the retiring Chairman of McGraw-Hill Incorporated, a major U.S. textbook and magazine publisher. The New York-based foundation would provide a rallying point for the promotion of corporate involvement in adult literacy from 1983 until its disbandment in 1993. Although a small foundation, its potential for influence can be judged from the makeup of the Board of Directors. The first Board included, among others, Barbara Bush, wife of then Vice-President of the United States, George Bush; Frank T. Cary, Chairman of the Executive Committee of IBM; James E. Burke, Chairman and CEO of Johnson and Johnson; Alan Pifer, President Emeritus of the Carnegie Corporation; and Alexander B. Trowbridge, President of the National Association of Manufacturers (BCEL, No. 1, September 1984:12). Originally set up—according to its President and founder, Harold McGraw—to encourage the private sector to give literacy a higher priority "among their many pressing social responsibilities" (ibid:1), the organization soon began to take a leadership role in all aspects of the national literacy campaign. McGraw himself had, in fact, donated the major share of startup funds ($400,000) for the Advertising Council's national advertising campaign.

BCEL's leadership would play an important role in securing corporate involvement in the adult literacy campaign over the ensuing decade. The foundation's staff pursued this objective through various means, including visiting states and hosting meetings of key business sectors. Its 1985 national meeting of representatives of the publishing, printing and bookselling industries, for example, resulted in the development of several industry-wide national literacy initiatives. Another key activity of the BCEL in the

mobilization of corporate support was its publishing function. Its regular monthly newsletter, distributed to the CEOs of all of America's major corporations, in addition to providing what was arguably the most comprehensive informational publication on literacy activities in the nation's history, also constituted a regular 'call to arms' to American business interests. As the campaign developed, the newsletter took on a kind of cheerleading or 'corporate booster' role, documenting even the most trivial corporate involvement in any aspect of literacy.

Business dominates state and national literacy organization The federal government's 1983 literacy initiative was, at base, a strategy for increasing privatization of adult literacy education. Unlike previous attempts to privatize this service by shifting responsibility from the public to the voluntary sector, however, the 1983 initiative sought privatization through both the voluntary and business sectors. At the launch of the federal literacy initiative in 1983, for example, before an invited audience of "200 business and literacy leaders", the Secretary of Education had endorsed the newly established Business Council for Effective Literacy as "a pioneer example of public-private sector partnerships for literacy" (BCEL, January 1985:2). The national Coalition for Literacy had established a 'business division' expressly for the cultivation of business support for literacy activities as well as for the literacy campaign itself. As a part of their National Literacy Campaign, specially prepared advertisements, intended to appeal to senior corporate management, were printed in the business press. Within seven months from the campaign's commencement, such specially targeted business press advertisements had appeared in 31 major magazines (BCEL, No. 9, October

1986:2) The telephone referral service which accompanied the national advertising campaign included a special 'business number' for corporations to call.

The direction of the national campaign, as documented in the pages of the monthly newsletter of the Business Council for Effective Literacy, was largely set by its business sponsors. The first coordinated response to the national advertising campaign, for example, was that of the Minnesota Literacy Council, which had continuing close links with the B. Dalton company. In early 1984, the Council established an Ad Campaign Response Group. In the same year, the Business Council for Effective Literacy was directly instrumental in the establishment of a governor-appointed state task force on literacy in Minnesota, chaired by a senior manager of the B. Dalton company—a prototype for the city and statewide literacy planning bodies which would mushroom in the coming decade. In several states the leadership role in the formation of state planning bodies would be assumed by corporate interests. Many state planning bodies would establish business advisory committees as well.

The formation of statewide organizing bodies to coordinate literacy activities was to be one of the key thrusts of BCEL activity in literacy over the first few years of the campaign and, by 1986, the organization's staff had already visited half the states in such an organizing capacity. In the scramble to cope with the demand stimulated by the national advertising campaign, states were generally responsive. However, it would also appear that much of the literacy organization, at both the state and national levels, was little more than a response to the new availability of corporate funding for such initiatives. Corporate sponsors such as the Gannett Foundation and the Sears Roebuck Foundation, for example, actively sought to fund such organizations. The national

literacy project undertaken by the Education Commission for the States was funded by the Sears Roebuck Foundation; Gannett was responsible for a large proportion of all state organization. In July 1985, the BCEL newsletter noted that the "rapidly developing literacy coalitions [were] heavily dependent on corporate financial support" (No. 4:1). Reliance on corporate support was institutionalized in several states with the establishment of literacy foundations and development funds to receive and distribute private sector funding for literacy.

Businesses support literacy campaign for a variety of reasons For some business sectors, the literacy issue presented itself as an ideal issue for philanthropic spending as well as for visible 'community' involvement. As the American Bar Association (ABA), which joined the literacy campaign in 1987 would put it, literacy was an issue with "no down side"[10] (1987:37). Yet, while some corporate initiatives were directed broadly, either towards creating a positive public image for the corporation through supporting a 'worthy cause' or towards influencing public policy in respect of funding and organization of adult literacy opportunities, others were more explicitly self-serving. Among these were a number of product promotions which tied purchase of the product to company contributions to the literacy cause. Several so-called 'literacy initiatives' of the publishing industries were also transparently calculated to develop their readership markets. Examples include Time Warner's 'Time to Read' literacy tutoring project which used only the company's own publications (*Time Magazine*, *Life*, *People* and *Sports Illustrated*, for example) as learning materials. Book retailers,

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[10] Such a view could, of course, only be sustained if illiteracy were presented as an individual problem, neither evidence of structured inequality nor the responsibility of governments to correct.

through their 'Give the Gift of Literacy' donation programme at retail outlets, somewhat more subtly promoted their own products through the general promotion of the benefits of reading. Newspaper and magazine publishers, in general, saw good 'copy' in the illiteracy issue; but they also saw an opportunity to directly promote their products. A major part of the presentation of the illiteracy crisis centred on the act of reading itself as a morally and socially uplifting activity, and the promotion of reading became a major campaign theme. In this, newspapers and magazines—as well as the publishing, printing and print distribution sectors—saw the possibility for direct market impacts as the reading public, not the so-called 'illiterate'—responded to the campaign message.

In many respects, business involvement in adult literacy was simply an extension of the school/business pattern of involvement, much of which had direct commercial motives. Educational technology companies, including IBM and Control Data for example, promoted literacy and their own products simultaneously; initial contributions of equipment and educational software were designed to gain access to the educational market. Similarly, the Newspapers in Education Project, a literacy initiative of the American Newspaper Publishers Association, in introducing local newspapers and teaching materials into both schools and adult literacy classes through free time-limited subscriptions, would have found industry endorsement for the initiative as a marketing tool in the potentially vast education market. Like the computer and soft drink industries, local newspapers also must have seen the potential for developing a future customer base in the student populations.

From their earliest involvement in adult literacy, however, business interests also saw in the issue an opportunity to engage in the broader education reform process and to achieve other social policy goals. And, though worker illiteracy was not initially the primary focus of campaigning, the generalization from adult illiteracy to widespread workforce illiteracy was always a component of the issue which held particular utility for the business activist lobby. It would become a more central focus of their involvement as the campaign and the decade progressed.

The American Literacy Crisis Becomes a Workforce Literacy Crisis

The context: educational reform and the quality of the labour supply In the general context of the educational reform movement—and the central role of business interests in that movement—the late 1970s and early 1980s had seen significantly increased criticism of the ability of schools to prepare students adequately for work. Businesses were regularly surveyed in the period about the quality of their workforces and of the labour supply in general. Useem provides an analysis of one such survey, conducted in 1981 in California's Silicon Valley by the county Office of Education. She notes that, though managers had "always complained that new workers are inadequately educated in school," the "intensity of their complaints" had risen in the early 1980s (1986:109). Respondents in the Silicon Valley survey, for example, had complained that students could not spell or do mathematics. They could not fill out applications; nor were they "good at interviews" (ibid:108).

The direct linking of the critique of public education to worker 'literacy' or—as it increasingly came to be called—'basic skills' was already well established in early

1981 when an article appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, trumpeting the role of employers in doing the work which schools had purportedly failed to do. Entitled "Remedial Bosses: Employers Take Over Where Schools Failed To Teach the Basics" (Hymowitz, 1991), the *Wall Street Journal* article would become among the most frequently cited 'evidence' in support of the thesis of workforce illiteracy in the early years of the campaign. In many respects, the presentation of the problem in this article set the terms for the campaign and, for this reason, it deserves particular attention.

The article started with a graphic illustration of the 'problem'—an excerpt from a job application submitted by a high school graduate who was also, quite obviously, a speaker of nonstandard English: "Well after I graduate from high school I had plan to find me a full-time job at a bank as a clerk. I like working with and around people and met new people and see different face. I would love to have a job at this bank because working at a bank meet so much to me and the more important thing in my life." The author went on to conclude: "The troubles that have beset U.S. classrooms in recent years are increasingly felt in the nation's offices and factories. ... More and more young people who can't read and write well and who have difficulty balancing a checkbook are entering a labor market desperate for workers who can master the sophisticated equipment found in modern plants and offices."

The article attributed problems "ranging from wasted investment in more efficient equipment to outright safety hazards" to "the lack of literate workers". And, fore-shadowing virtually every subsequent account of the problem, it cited the role of undereducation in the international productivity race: "poorly educated workers are contributing to the U.S.'s productivity difficulties. One reason the Japanese are

achieving higher productivity rates than the U.S. these days is because their workers are better educated". This generalization was borne out by the testimony of a Pennsylvania executive who claimed: "At JLG Industries, Inc., poorly educated workers are our No. 1 problem, the main factor slowing our growth." The evidence he provided to support his claim was anecdotal: "One employee who didn't know how to read a ruler mismeasured yards and yards of steel sheet. He wasted nearly $700 worth of material in one morning." This, the 'costly error' anecdote, would become a ubiquitous feature of the portrayal of the workforce illiteracy problem.

The *Wall Street Journal* article also cited workplace safety as a cause for concern about worker illiteracy. "Undereducated workers," it asserted, "can also be dangerous—both to themselves and to others. One illiterate worker—employed at an unspecified company cited in a Conference Board Study—was killed, because he couldn't read a warning sign. And an assembly-line worker at a large industrial-equipment manufacturer almost killed several co-workers when a heavy piece of metal that he hadn't attached properly to a machine [again because he purportedly couldn't read the assembly instructions (S.H.)] flew off". Worker inadequacy was also directly implicated in industrial policies which displaced workers with machinery: "Some companies," it was noted, "view their remedial instruction as only a stopgap measure. JLG industries whose on-the-job training these days includes lessons in how to add fractions and read rulers, is increasingly seeking to solve its labor problems with robots and computerized machine-tool equipment" (ibid).

Although, as previously noted, the article was to become the cited authority for many subsequent claims about workforce literacy problems, its function as a vehicle

for the age-old employer complaint, 'you can't get good help these days' is revealed in its willingness to quote an insurance company supervisor simply expressing frustration at workers' attitudes: "Many workers don't know how to use the telephone. They let it ring and ring and when they finally answer they just say, 'My boss ain't here.' They can't seem to answer the simplest question."

The *Wall Street Journal* article was typical of subsequent media coverage of what would become known as 'workforce illiteracy'. The one-sided presentation of largely unsubstantiated employer grievances which were frequently little more than prejudices, the stereotyping of workers, the use of apocryphal anecdotes, the generalization from a workplace error or a badly written sentence to the position of the nation in the global economy—all these would become standard features of the depiction of the worker illiteracy crisis.

Worker illiteracy—a 'hook' to attract business support The crystallization of a specific workforce literacy campaign out of the more general literacy campaign, and the increasing tendency to link adult literacy to the needs of the workplace were, to a large extent, the product of business involvement in the issue. But they were also, importantly, the hook which was used to attract business interest in—and financial support for—literacy activities.

From its initial launch, the 1980s American literacy campaign sought to link the general issue of adult illiteracy to workplace performance and corporate profitability as well as to national productivity. This goal was initially pursued by literacy campaigners—particularly, those involved in the National Literacy Campaign—in an effort

to persuade the corporate sector that it was in its interest to support the mobilization of a 'national cadre' of literacy volunteers. The business advertising developed for the National Literacy Campaign delivered just such a 'bottom line' appeal to the targeted group, corporate CEOs. One such advertisement, for example, boldly claimed: "27 million Americans can't read and guess who pays the price—the top 120 U.S. Corporations" (Coalition for Literacy/Ad Council Advertisement, quoted in Fox and Baker, 1990:86).

The inaugural issue of the BCEL Newsletter, published just months after the launch of the national advertising campaign in September 1984, reiterated the appeal. In his editorial "Message to Corporate CEO's", Harold McGraw wrote: "Virtually all businesses today are adversely affected by the large numbers in their work force with weak or nonexistent basic skills that result in lower productivity, poor product quality, lost management and supervisory time, and restricted mobility and promotability of employees" (BCEL, No. 1:1). An article in the same newsletter cited unspecified "government studies and independent research" to support an estimate that "about 15 percent of persons in the workforce are functionally illiterate" (ibid:2). "Even among professional and managerial workers," it was claimed, "11 percent are functionally illiterate, as are 29-30 percent of semi-skilled and unskilled workers." The article went on to quote anonymous "experts" to support the claim that the financial costs to business resulting from worker illiteracy were in the billions of dollars. Among the costs—in addition to those associated with low worker productivity, absenteeism, uneven product quality, and lost management and supervisory time—were also included the costs of corporate training. Employers, it was asserted, were "paying

hundreds of millions of dollars annually to operate in-house basic skills programmes" (ibid). Additional impacts of putative adult illiteracy on business, according to McGraw's inaugural editorial, included those relating to labour market choice for employers. "An estimated three-fourths of the currently unemployed", the article charged, "are functionally illiterate, seriously reducing the pool of competent persons for new hires" (ibid:1).

Public and voluntary sectors court businesses for literacy funding An irony not lost on adult literacy educationalists or the institutions responsible—at least in theory—for responding to public demand for literacy programmes was that, even as federal and state officials and government agencies declared their commitment to literacy through the establishment of organizing bodies and task forces, new legislation, and a range of other initiatives, little new public funding for literacy education materialized. Indeed, as already noted, federal funding was actually frozen for the first years of the National Literacy Campaign and redistribution of federal funds in 1984 was to see actual funding reductions in several of the larger states (BCEL, No. 2, January 1985).

In state after state, as the Campaign progressed, literacy task forces, governors' commissions, and population literacy surveys all attested to the enormity of the adult illiteracy problem and the urgent necessity of doing something about it. In the majority of cases, however, the expressed commitment of state governments was little more than rhetorical. The fact that the state organizing bodies themselves were substantially funded through corporate philanthropic foundations was indicative of the kind of support which could be expected for the actual delivery of programmes. Yet

literacy campaigners at the national, state and local level continued to exhort adult 'illiterates' to come forward for help.

As had happened in previous local literacy campaigns—and, most dramatically, in the mid-1970s national campaign in Britain—the 1980s literacy campaign in the U.S. generated a hugely increased demand for adult education services; and again, as in those previous campaigns, no region of the country was prepared to meet the increased demand. Within the first two weeks alone of the ABC/PBS PLUS campaign, for example, the national telephone referral service took 35,000 calls (BCEL, No. 9, October 1986). Literacy and basic education providers were overwhelmed by the local response as well and, in both New York and Chicago, for example, programmes had to close their doors to new students and tutors less than a month into the three-year campaign (ibid). In 1988, the Business Council for Effective Literacy newsletter reported that "hundreds of thousands of students and potential tutors had been put on waiting lists or turned away for lack of resources to serve them" (BCEL, No. 14, January 1988:6).

The pressure on both statutory and voluntary providers of literacy to meet the new demand increased as the campaign gathered momentum—particularly with the entry of the print and broadcast media into direct campaigning and 'public awareness' activities in the mid-1980s. For both sectors, the pursuit of corporate support for the organization and delivery of literacy programmes became a major preoccupation. Given the scarcity of public funding in the face of exponentially rising demand, the existence of grant programmes such as that of B. Dalton—and, as the decade progressed, an increasing number of other large and small corporate donors—held out the only hope

for many programmes of sustained funding and a continued existence. The federal government's strategy of shifting a major share of responsibility for adult literacy to the voluntary sector would also require additional financing, most of which was expected to come from corporate funding and sponsorships.

Making the case for workplace literacy Most literacy volunteer organizations, as well as many public literacy educationalists and institutions, responded to the situation by tailoring their programming and their message to appeal to potential corporate funders. In this, they were assisted by federal, state and local governments as well as by organizations such as the Business Council for Effective Literacy. In 1985, for example, the Business Council for Effective Literacy published a pamphlet entitled *Functional Illiteracy Hurts Business*, for the use of volunteer groups soliciting business support for their activities. In 1980, the Minnesota Literacy Council, with the support of the B. Dalton company, had been one of the first literacy organizations to survey local employers about their workforce 'basic skills needs'. By the time their results were published in 1985 the strategy had become common practice. Literacy surveys of local businesses would flourish over the 1985-1990 period. And, by 1985 a number of new 'experts' on the subject had also begun to contribute to the 'research base' which would demonstrate the importance of literacy programmes to business.

In its January 1985 newsletter, the Business Council for Effective Literacy reported on one of the first publications specifically on the jobs/basic skills issue to achieve national recognition (BCEL, No. 2:6-7). The report was written by Thomas Sticht and Larry Mikulecky, both of whom would become among the country's foremost

workforce/workplace literacy experts over the coming decade. *Job Related Basic Skills: Cases and Conclusions* (Sticht and Mikulecky, 1984) essentially drew on previous work which the authors had done to support a number of conclusions and recommendations for employers. Sticht had developed a training programme for Army recruits with low reading scores in the 1970s; his 'functional context' approach, limiting reading instruction to that required to read materials encountered on the job, would become the 'bible' for most workplace literacy methodology. Mikulecky had co-authored a report in 1980 comparing the reading practices of workers in a wide range of occupations with those of high school students (Mikulecky and Diehl, 1980). The study, though far from conclusive, would provide the workforce literacy campaign with its primary 'evidence' of the high (and increasing) literacy content of all jobs, including the least skilled.

Their joint 1984 report set the terms of the workforce literacy campaigns, from the diagnosis of the problem to the solution. A workforce 'basic skills crisis' loomed in America, they argued, because of two combined factors—the changing makeup of the workforce, particularly entry level workers, and the changing nature of employment. Simply put, on the one hand, employers were having to recruit entry level workers from a less educated pool as the actual numbers of young workers declined and more and more of the better able high school graduates chose to go on to postsecondary education; and, on the other hand, as the service and technology employment sectors expanded in relation to manufacturing and resource-based work, jobs were requiring higher and higher basic skills. The authors presented case studies of workplace designed and instituted 'basic skills' programmes, including that of Sticht's work with

Army recruits. Their recommendations outlined what would become the standard formula for the development of workplace basic skills programmes: analyzing the 'basic skills needs' of the employer, developing company specific content based on an analysis of job tasks, and measuring the learning in the workplace context. Following Sticht and Mikulecky, numerous reports on the alleged problem of workforce illiteracy or 'basic skills deficits' were produced (see, for example, Skagen, 1986; Speights, undated; CBTFL, 1988).

Defining the problem: the popular interpretation BCEL's July 1986 newsletter provided a typical interpretation of the issue as the popular media would present it over the remainder of the decade. In a short item entitled, "What if you couldn't read?", the newsletter laid out, one after another, the stereotypical profiles of illiterates and apocryphal anecdotes which had been the stock in trade of literacy campaigning for decades; the new twist was that most of the references now were to workers (BCEL, No. 8:3). The 'profiles' included a Ford Motor employee who had "bluff[ed] his way" through job applications, memos and instruction manuals—even his high school equivalency exam pass had been "pure guesswork"; a Polaroid worker who had covered up his illiteracy until he was promoted to a supervisory position and produced unreadable reports; a welder who had "cheated his way through welding school" and whose inability to read the word *clockwise* had led him to install an industrial blower incorrectly, costing the company "thousands of dollars". The apocryphal anecdotes—many of which, though unattributed, were repeated in numerous media accounts in the period—included one about a feed-lot labourer who had killed a herd of cattle

by accidentally feeding them poison; a Navy mechanic who could not read a repair manual and, as a consequence, made a $250,000 error; an insurance company worker who paid a policyholder more than two thousand dollars on a hundred dollar claim; and a steel-mill worker whose misordering of spare parts resulted in a one million dollar cost to the company. Other anecdotes implicated firefighters, a train motorman and an industrial worker in fatal, or near fatal, accidents due to their supposed illiteracy.

Orchestrating a national workforce literacy campaign With the problem thus defined, the workplace literacy campaign had come into full swing by 1987. Both President Reagan and his Secretary of Labour, for example, addressed the nation on the issue on Labour Day of that year. Round 2 of the national broadcasting campaign, Project Literacy U.S., which began in July 1987, adopted workforce literacy as its main theme. In September of that year, the commercial television network, ABC, presented *Bluffing It*, a film about a worker who is promoted to plant foreman and is later fired when his illiteracy is discovered. One month later, the public broadcasting network, PBS, presented a documentary on illiteracy in the workplace. On the morning of the PBS broadcast, Barbara Bush hosted a national 'PLUS Business Breakfast' in Washington for government and business leaders. Local PBS stations hosted their own PLUS 'Business Breakfast' shows. BCEL reported that more than 400 PLUS Business Breakfasts had been organized by the end of 1987 by the national office of the PLUS campaign alone (BCEL, No. 13, October 1987:7). State and local task forces estab

lished to support the national broadcasting campaign also targeted business leaders and carried the workforce literacy message.

Though 'Executive Literacy Breakfasts' had already been a feature of the literacy campaign's attempt to increase business involvement in the issue, the PLUS campaign's business breakfasts were specifically focused on the issue of workforce illiteracy. Their objective was to "bring together literacy planners and provider groups with local business leaders" (ibid). State and municipal conferences on workforce literacy began to be organized. In Oregon, for example, the PLUS Task Force held such a conference for the state business leaders entitled, "The Bottom Line: Literacy in the Workplace" (ibid).

The "nation responds" to the workforce literacy crisis In some states and municipalities, literacy campaigning had started to focus specifically on the issue of workforce illiteracy even before the push of the national PLUS campaign. Massachusetts, for example, had established a statewide Workplace Education Initiative—with a combination of federal and state funding—as early as 1986.

In 1988, in response to intensive lobbying, federal legislators voted a special supplemental bill to immediately create and fund a National Workplace Literacy Program. By 1989, as Askov and Aderman note, the concept of workplace literacy had "come into its own" when this supplemental bill was entrenched in amendments to the federal Adult Education Act; workplace literacy was included as a "discrete category of service" for which specific funding could be granted under the Act (1991:16). The federal initiative generated many state actions and in 1989, for

example, nine governors committed their states to participating, with the federal Department of Labor, in a "State Policy Academy on Enhancing Adult Literacy for Jobs and Productivity" (Chynoweth, 1989). By 1990, Arkansas's Governor's Commission on Adult Literacy had set up a Workplace Initiative for Skills Education; Indiana had established a new Office of Workforce Literacy; and, in Mississippi, the governor had established a state Commission on Work Force Excellence and the Governor's Office for Literacy had appointed a Special Assistant for Workforce Literacy (BCEL, No. 25, October 1990:5). In 1990 the U.S. Department of Labour (DOL) had also established the Office of Work-Based Learning "to provide a central point for the DOL's various activities in workforce literacy" (ibid:2).

In the ensuing five year period, a wide variety of workplace programmes would be initiated, and publicly supported, as 'workplace literacy' programmes; a number of public policy changes would be pursued on the basis of the claims put forward by workforce literacy campaigners; and key sections of federal labour legislation would be subjected to review. All these initiatives were founded on the assumption of a national 'crisis' of worker literacy.

WORKFORCE ILLITERACY BEYOND THE UNITED STATES: THE GENERAL CONTEXT

International scope of trends The 1980s period of literacy campaigning in the United States was a product of a social, economic and political dynamic in some measure unique to that country. A century-long history of literacy and educational 'crises', a legacy of aggressive business lobbying at all levels of government, an historically weak commitment to public services—these, among an array of other factors including the

nature of the American media, combined to make both the decade of literacy campaigning, and the particular focus on workers, in many respects singularly American. However, as several analysts of late twentieth century economic and social policy have documented, many key trends which have characterized the period have been, to a greater or lesser extent, international in scope (see, for example, Silver and Silver, 1991; Lowe, 1995). And, as the volumes edited by Finegold, McFarland and Richardson (1992, 1993) document, this is particularly true of recent trends in education and training policies in North America and Britain.[11]

What Ken Jones (1989) has described as a 'right turn' in education began in both North America and Britain with the general economic crisis of the early 1970s, a crisis which marked the beginning of the end of the post-war expansion of public education systems and the breakup of what in Britain has been called the 'post-war consensus'. In the United States and Britain, in particular, conservative politicians, the corporate sector and the popular media joined forces in condemning many of the trends which had characterized post-war educational policy, particularly from the 1960s, including general expansion of public educational systems and moves towards comprehensive schooling and away from selection and segregation. Chitty has observed of England and Wales, that state education—and, in particular, comprehensive education—became convenient scapegoats when the "welfare-capitalist consensus" disintegrated after 1973 (1993:9). Just as they had done in the United States, leading employers and industrialists in England, he notes "painted a picture of unaccountable teachers delivering a

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[11] And, indeed, it is true of Australia as well—though that country is outside the scope of this thesis.

tired and irrelevant curriculum to bored, illiterate and innumerate teenagers" (ibid). During the early years of the Thatcher government, schools in Britain were put under similar financial pressure to that which they had come under in many United States jurisdictions in the same period and, as in the United States, many were forced to look to the corporate and voluntary sectors for assistance (Lowe, 1995).

The arguments put forward in *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 America were not essentially different from the prevailing conservative view of education's role in Britain in the same period, a view which linked education directly to industrial and economic regeneration and, by implication as well as by direct ascription, laid much of the blame for industrial decline and competitive weakness at the door of the public education systems. From the mid-1970s in Britain, educational reformers—including the Labour government of James Callaghan—had argued that education must serve the needs of the capitalist economy in a more directly utilitarian way. This had been a central tenet put forward in what became known as the "Great Debate" on education which Callaghan himself launched in 1976 (Chitty, 1993; Clarke and Willis, 1984; Cathcart and Esland, 1983).

Many of the specific ideological underpinnings of educational reform in North America were also evident in reform initiatives in England in the 1980s (Brown, 1993; Hirsch, 1992; Johnson, 1989; Shew, 1990). For example, the idea that schools should be subjected to market forces was translated into a number of reforms—among others, 'opting out' (of local authority control) in favour of local management of schools, or what is known in America as 'site-based management'. Another related policy reform was the introduction in England during the 1980s of competition in the 'educational

marketplace', pursued through polices such as open enrolment and the establishment of school league tables. In both the United States and England—and, more recently, in Canada as well—educational reformers have also pursued reforms directed at the marginalization of educationalists and the concomitant extension of decision making power to the so-called 'consumers' of education, parents and employers (Useem, 1986; Matheson and Bernbaum, 1988; Green, 1991b; Simon, 1991; Brown, 1993)

Differences in processes of trans-national policy adoption In spite of general similarities in trends, however, there have been key differences both in the processes through which trends have taken root trans-nationally and in the ways in which 'borrowed' or adopted policies are interpreted in practice in their adoptive countries. For example, while geographical proximity and relative population base, combined with recent neo-liberal economic and trade policies, mean that Canada can hardly avoid absorbing American influences in any aspect of social, economic or political life, the process of actual transfer of education and training policies is, in fact, very much complicated by Canada's federal structure and the autonomous position of the provinces in respect of education. In England, on the other hand, though many factors including geographical remove and membership in the European Union present strong countervailing influences which militate against direct American influence, there has been significant direct borrowing of training and education policies and models from the United States under successive Conservative governments since 1978 (see, for example, Finegold, McFarland and Richardson, 1992, 1993).

Just as business gained increasing control of systems for the education and training of their future workforces in the United States in the 1980s, so they did in England. The 1986 Education Act, for example, gave business a place on the governing bodies of schools. Future employers, as Lowe (1995) observes, were thus given a legislated role in the running of the schools. Though similar reforms have been pursued in Canada, the complete autonomy of provinces in respect of education, and the absence of either a national education act or a federal department of education, has meant that sweeping educational reforms such as England's 1986 Education Act have been impossible. A second factor which has distinguished Canada from both England and the United States and which has militated against the general adoption of regressive educational reform in that country has been the election in several provinces over the past two decades of (at least nominally) social democratic governments.

The broad arena of vocational and employment training in England has been, arguably, even more directly influenced by American trends than has education. Among the best examples of direct borrowing of an American model is that of the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). Explicitly modeled on American Private Industry Councils, TECs have been the vehicle through which tripartite control of training has shifted entirely to a system controlled by business interests (Bailey, 1993). In Canada, again by contrast, the process of privatization of training has been much less straightforward, though arguably no less complete. From an entirely state controlled national training system, established in the early 1960s, successive federal governments in the 1980s have attempted to accomplish privatization through a

corporatist model.[12] However, while this initiative has been successfully taken up in some provinces, it has failed in others. Reforms in training policy, while generally tending towards increasing private sector control and the elimination of both state control and a national planning component, remain essentially *ad hoc* and, in many jurisdictions, labour interests retain significant influence.

Variation in corporate influence practices As in the United States, so also in England and Canada, businesses have recently stepped up efforts to cultivate their image as 'corporate citizens' or responsible 'social partners'. They have been assisted in this both by conservative government policies which have given them increased control over public services and by sections of the media which, as in the United States, have presented corporate interventions as altruistic, and trumpeted as munificent what, on examination, appears both meagre and self-serving.[13] In general, it would appear that businesses have been able to achieve important gains in influence over education and training in England in recent years without the aggressive activism which has characterized their attempts to increase their influence in either the United States or Canada, however. This is, in part, explained by Lowe (1995) as a function of the relatively

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[12] The late 1980s creation of Labour Force Development Boards, made up of representatives of business, labour and so-called equity groups, constituted the principal national effort to move responsibility for the planning and funding of training programmes from the state to the private sector. The boards were enthusiastically received by labour which had not, hitherto, had a formal role in labour force development planning; capital was less enthusiastic, however, and in all but one or two provinces the boards never became operative. In general, the attempt to move towards corporatist control of training has failed in Canada; privatization of training delivery, however, has proceeded with extraordinary speed and trades unions have become among the principal private sector deliverers.

[13] One example of this tendency was the positive press which Ford achieved with its Employee Development and Assistance Program (EDAP). Though, in terms of concessions to labour, the fund for employee development represented very little, it was greeted as a radical and generous company initiative Similarly, Rover Group has been able to present itself as an enlightened corporate citizen with its in-house training program (see, for example, Whitfield, 1991; Berkeley, 1991; Donaldson, 1993).

greater power of central government to intervene in training and education policy in Britain. As he notes, in both Canada and the United States, provinces and states retain autonomy for education; this has meant that, on the one hand, the national or federal government has not been able to intervene directly as it does in England and, on the other hand, that there has been considerably more room for the exercise of influence (by both the local legislature and non-governmental lobbies) at the state or provincial level. This has, Lowe observes, led to a far greater amount of lobbying by the corporate sector in their bid to influence government policy at both levels.

CANADA: THE AMERICAN LITERACY CAMPAIGN IS REPLICATED

Background: declining public commitment to adult basic education The early 1980s was not a promising period for adult literacy education in Canada—as, indeed, it had not been in the United States. Although the federal government had, from the passing of the Adult Occupational Training Act in 1967, sponsored tens of thousands of adults annually into educational 'upgrading' programmes in preparation for vocational training, the commitment had begun to falter from the mid-1970s. Applicants whose tested reading levels were at the lower end of the scale were the first to be excluded from upgrading programmes and, by 1980, there was virtually no literacy level upgrading being funded by the federal Basic Training for Skill Development programme (Thomas, 1983). By the mid-1980s commitment to all educational upgrading had been considerably lessened and the numbers of adults in full-time upgrading programmes would continue to decline for the remainder of the decade. The majority

of literacy programming available was on a part-time basis, funded by provincial governments. Nowhere was such provision guaranteed by legal mandate.

Business initiates Canadian counterpart of U.S. literacy campaign Within a year of the formation of the Business Council for Effective Literacy in New York, a Canadian delegation representing the book publishing industry and a voluntary literacy organization visited the foundation with a view to establishing a Canadian counterpart. The Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy (CBTFL), modeled on the Business Council for Effective Literacy, was set up in 1985 with a book publisher as its president. With the entry of the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA) into the literacy campaign in 1987, Southam Press, a Canadian newspaper publisher and member of the ANPA, joined the CBTFL in the drive to bring the American literacy campaign to Canada. Indeed, Southam was almost singlehandedly responsible for launching a literacy campaign in Canada when it conducted (and heavily publicized) a nationwide literacy survey of the adult population in 1987 (Creative Research Group, 1987). Southam's newspapers across the country gave front page coverage to the survey's conclusion that up to one quarter of Canadian adults were "functionally illiterate".

Southam was joined by others in the newspaper publishing industry in Canada and from 1987, just as their American counterparts had done, Canadian magazines and newspaper syndicates regularly featured articles on the adult illiteracy issue. Across the country, daily newspapers and magazines carried regular stories on the subject. Media treatment of the issue was virtually identical on both sides of the North American border; indeed, many of the same anecdotes were used, altered only to give

them a Canadian context. Like the newspaper publishers, book publishing and retailing associations also span the North American border and the strategic targeting of literacy by these industries was undertaken concurrently in both countries as well. Projects such as the book retailers' 'Give the Gift of Literacy' campaign, for example, had their Canadian launch within weeks of the American launch.

The replication in Canada of American campaign strategies and activities can be accounted for largely by the trans-border character of many of the agencies and organizations primarily responsible for initiating the literacy campaign in the United States, chief among them the advertising and 'communications' industries. However, in key respects, the Canadian literacy campaign was not a 'homegrown' campaign even to this limited extent. For, while Canadian companies worked to create their own literacy campaign in Canada, they were also assisted by the American campaign itself in the endeavour, as many American campaign initiatives were transported directly across the border, unmediated. The Project Literacy U.S. campaign, for example, was broadcast concurrently in the United States and Canada and, in some Canadian jurisdictions, the local organizing function of the broadcasting initiative also operated. In British Columbia, for instance, American Public Broadcasting System (PBS) employees worked with the provincial Adult Basic Education Association from the inception of the PLUS campaign in 1986 to establish community-based literacy organizations in a number of localities throughout the province. These Canadian organizations' direct affiliation with the national U.S. Project was clear from their names—Project Literacy Kelowna and Project Literacy Victoria, for example. Similarly, Project Literacy B.C., a campaigning organization which in 1990 gave rise

to a federally sponsored provincial literacy coalition, had been a direct offshoot of the American Project Literacy U.S. (Godin, 1996).

In many regions of Canada, the PLUS broadcasts were joined by provincial and local television and radio programmes on the literacy issue. And, as in the United States, literacy 'hotlines', linked both to the PLUS and the local broadcasts, were established in many jurisdictions. Indeed, in many regions of Canada, local literacy programming was itself based on American broadcasts. Literacy teaching and telephone tutoring programmes such as that produced by Kentucky Educational Television, for example, were sold to governments and cable television companies across North America, including some of the most remote parts of Canada.

Governments respond to literacy campaign In spite of the fact that the federal government had largely discontinued its support for adult basic education by the mid-1980s, and few provincial or municipal jurisdictions appeared inclined to step into the breach, campaigning around adult illiteracy was, nevertheless, taken up with some enthusiasm by Canadian governments. Whereas efforts to stimulate public interest in the issue had largely failed in the 1970s, the 1980s would see a level of campaigning activity and organization around the issue which was in many respects comparable to that taking place in the United States. In 1986, Canada's then Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney—in response to Canadian corporate lobbying and following U.S. President Ronald Reagan with whom he had cultivated a strong political and personal identification—declared adult literacy a priority in the national Parliament. Within one year of the Parliamentary announcement, the country's first federal government body with

responsibility for adult literacy was formed and by 1988 the Mulroney government had committed to spending $110 million on literacy over a five year period. This new funding would be spent not on delivery of educational programmes, however, but on campaigning activities modeled closely on the U.S. prototype.

U.S. campaign activities replicated in Canada The National Literacy Secretariat, the literacy body established by the federal government in 1987, played an active role in seeding and funding the Canadian counterparts of the U.S. statewide planning bodies. Over a five year period from 1986, literacy 'networks' or 'coalitions' were formed in virtually every province and territory of Canada. Most provinces also established literacy commissions or task forces—again, as in the United States, generally including significant business and private sector representation. Within a year or two of the establishment of the National Literacy Secretariat, the majority of provinces had produced literacy reports, promulgated literacy policies or statements, and established Literacy Offices or Divisions. Provincial and national conferences and forums on adult literacy were organized. Existing voluntary literacy organizations at both the national and provincial level were given a new lease on life with infusions of money from the federal government's five-year funding allocation.

U.S. campaign policies replicated in Canada The 1980s approach to literacy policy in Canada at all jurisdictional levels directly reflected that which had been put forward by the 1983 U.S. Secretary's Initiative on Literacy and promoted by the American private sector National Literacy Campaign. That approach was essentially one of creating a consensus that adult literacy education was not properly a public service but should

become the shared responsibility of all sectors of society. In accordance with this objective, governments at all levels actively pursued the privatization of the adult literacy education service through a tripartite arrangement (commonly referred to in both countries as 'partnerships') involving business and labour, the voluntary sector and the public sector, but with minimal public sector funding support. From its establishment, the mandate of the National Literacy Secretariat had included centrally the privatization or 'partnering' goal and the initial staffing of the agency included one person whose sole responsibility was to foster business and labour involvement in literacy.

Although several provinces allocated new funding for literacy, virtually all jurisdictions adopted the U.S. model of literacy funding and delivery, designating central roles for voluntary provision and private sector funding. This included, in some provinces as in some American states, the establishment by government of private foundations to raise and disburse corporate funds for literacy.

Business interests shape Canadian literacy campaign Though there had been some marginal literacy activity in the early 1980s, linked both to Canadian organization around the issue in the late 1970s and to international literacy activity,[14] the 1985 formation of the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy (CBTFL) and Southam's literacy survey would do more to make adult illiteracy a public issue—and to stimulate

[14] World Literacy of Canada, which had attempted to initiate a literacy campaign in Canada in the mid-1970s, continued its Canadian literacy activities into the 1980s; the Movement for Canadian Literacy, formed in 1977 as a part of World Literacy of Canada's attempt to mount a campaign, continued its rather tenuous existence; and the Canadian Commission of Unesco sponsored a report on adult illiteracy in Canada which was published in 1983 (Thomas, 1983).

government intervention—than all of the previous decade's activity combined. In fact, the philanthropic strategies adopted by Canadian member companies of the North American publishing and communications industry associations were key to stimulating federal government support for literacy campaigning activities; without the central involvement of business, it is doubtful whether the issue would have been embraced by either the federal or provincial governments.

Shortly after its formation, the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy—whose directors included representatives of the book publishing and retailing industries, the international paper manufacturer, Abitibi-Price, and the Retail Council of Canada—received funding from the federal government to prepare a report on the costs of illiteracy. Released in February 1988, the CBTFL's report, entitled *Measuring the Costs of Illiteracy*, like the Southam survey which had preceded it by only a few months, was given a great deal of media attention. Indeed, its author suggested that the publicity around the CBTFL report probably constituted "the most publicity in a single day for the issue of illiteracy" (CBTFL, 1988b). Across the country, national television networks as well as newspapers, magazines and radio covered the story: adult illiteracy cost Canadian society a purported $10 billion annually through crime, welfare dependency, unnecessary illness, foregone wages and a range of other pre-sumed effects. Of the $10 billion, the report claimed, $4 billion were direct losses to business caused by illiterate workers. Industrial accidents, low productivity and absenteeism topped the list of illiteracy-related costs (CBTFL, 1988a).

The American Bar Association (1987) observed that business had made the problem of illiteracy "real" in 1980s America; the same may be said of Canada in this period.

A Canadian adult education text would describe Southam's unsolicited literacy survey as the "single most influential contribution to the policy development process" (Selman and Dampier, 1991:169-170). And the CBTFL report had, the authors went on to assert, quantified "the insidious economic effects of illiteracy" which they claimed was "a clearly understood consequence, free of the entrapping of "softer" social concerns" (ibid).

The literacy campaign becomes a workforce literacy campaign What business had done, in fact, was not so much make the problem of illiteracy 'real' as make it almost exclusively a problem for business, and the linking of literacy to business concerns would be a defining feature of 1980s literacy campaign activities in Canada, just as it was in the United States in this period. The CBTFL survey, though the first highly publicised employer survey conducted in the period, was by no means the only such one. As early as 1985, for example, the industrial relations advisor for the Canadian Manufacturers' Association had conducted an informal poll of the association's 3,500 members on the question of worker illiteracy (Ritts, 1986). And, following the publication of the CBTFL report, the federal government's National Literacy Secretariat contracted with both the Conference Board of Canada and the Canadian office of the American conservative think tank, the Hudson Institute, to prepare reports on the economic costs of illiteracy. Both reports were published in 1990 and both essentially reiterated the conclusions of their predecessor, the CBTFL report (DesLauriers, 1990; Drouin, 1990).

Armed with the results of these reports, and frequently using their own locally produced 'studies', literacy volunteers and public institutions responsible for literacy, as well as trades unions and union federations, worked to persuade businesses that illiteracy among their workforces was a problem and that they could provide custom-made programming to address the problem.

Both the federal and provincial governments were particularly keen to advance the interpretation of adult illiteracy as a workplace problem as well. Workplace literacy forums and conferences were funded across the country. A body of research specific to the Canadian workplace literacy context was produced, the majority supported by one or more levels of government (see, for example, Taylor and Lewe, 1990; Taylor, Lewe and Draper, 1991; Waugh, 1992; Taylor, 1993). And, as in the United States, a wide variety of agencies, private and public, was supported to develop and deliver literacy programmes in both private and public sector workplaces.[15]

ENGLAND: WORKFORCE ILLITERACY, A CONSTRUCTION OF EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS

Changing focus of the literacy service In 1980 the central literacy agency for England and Wales, from 1978 named the Adult Literacy Unit, had become the Adult Literacy *and Basic Skills* Unit (emphasis added).[16] The 1980 name change signalled the

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[15] As early as 1986, in fact, the employment department of the federal government had granted three years of funding ($1.2 million) to the Canadian offshoot of the American volunteer organization, Laubach Literacy, to conduct an "industrial tutoring" pilot project in three locations across the country (Batdorf, 1991).

[16] Originally the Adult Literacy Resource Agency, the agency was established by central government in 1975 in response to the newly launched adult literacy campaign. Its mandate was initially confined to assisting local authorities and voluntary organizations deal with the demand for literacy tuition stimulated by the campaign and, in this capacity, it was intended to continue for only one year. Although it was not

beginning of a more directly work-related focus for the agency; for, although its remit was theoretically broadened to include something called 'basic skills', the skills referred to in its new name were restricted to those which could be linked to immediate employability (ALBSU, 1983). And, though the remit was broadened again in 1982 to remove the restriction concerning immediate employability, ALBSU would become increasingly more attuned, as the Conservative decade progressed, to the economic rationale for literacy and basic education provision. An early indication of the changing emphasis was the agency's increased links with the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). In this, ALBSU was a part of a more general trend which was influencing adult literacy policy and practice at the local level as well. Indeed, as Finn observed in 1985, even the voluntary sector in Britain was being transformed in this period by conservative politics and the new funding realities. Many organizations had, Finn noted, "become subcontractors for the MSC and their traditional activities [had] been increasingly subordinated to their new role of the management of unemployed" (Finn, 1985, quoted in Clare, 1985:54). Whereas 17 percent of literacy students in 1976 had been unemployed, that number had almost doubled by 1985 (Richards, 1985). With the establishment of the Youth Training Scheme in 1983, youth referrals also constituted an increasing proportion of the adult literacy clientele. This was reflected in the change in the average age of the student body over the decade and, by the mid-1980s, a much higher proportion were under the age of 21 (ibid).

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disbanded at the end of the first year, its tenure has been subject to review on a two or three year basis through to the present.

Indeed, as a strategy for gaining the confidence and support of conservative governments, a strengthened human capital rationale for a public literacy service made as much pragmatic sense in England as it did in the United States and Canada. Both volunteers and professionals involved in the adult literacy service in England found themselves in the early 1980s in a situation very similar to their counterparts in North America—their programmes demonstrably even less supported and their long-term prospects arguably even more in question. In 1985, a Workers' Educational Association (WEA) report on Adult Basic Education concluded that adult education remained an "impoverished sector" of educational provision (1985:5). The WEA assessment was confirmed in a 1988 report by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit. The ALBSU report estimated that the very best provision by a local education authority met no more than 4 percent of the need; the poorest authority, it was claimed, met less than 0.05 percent of the need (ALBSU, undated:5).

Like their North American counterparts, England's adult literacy providers responded in part by endeavouring to demonstrate the usefulness of their service in terms which were likely to meet with the approval of policy makers and funders. The promotion of a general literacy service, such as had taken place in the mid-1970s period, had been to a large extent eclipsed by the early 1980s; the major focus of local and voluntary provision—and of ALBSU's advocacy—in this period was the literacy and basic education needs of the unemployed.

North American links Following the mid-1970s literacy campaign, which had itself been strongly influenced by the example of the United States[17], trans-Atlantic linkages in the adult literacy field became more explicit, and direct connections among adult literacy professionals were actively pursued.[18] By the late 1980s, professional exchanges, delegations of policy makers and programme visits—all had become relatively commonplace. In October 1987, Alan Wells, the director of ALBSU, and Kenneth Baker, then Britain's Secretary of State for Education and Science, had met with Barbara Bush at the American Embassy in London.[19] In 1988, a two-year exchange was initiated between a New York City college and ALBSU. The Business Council for Effective Literacy reported that, in June 1988, as a component of this exchange, 125 "leading British and American adult literacy practitioners" had attended a four-day conference in New York and a follow-up conference was planned for the following year (BCEL, No. 16, July 1988:2). In Canada, the federal government's National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), from its establishment in 1987, sought to forge direct links with ALBSU, and NLS officials and staff would visit ALBSU's London headquarters on several occasions in the early years of the Canadian agency's mandate.

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[17] It is beyond the scope of this thesis to describe the mid-1970s British literacy campaign more comprehensively. The American influences on that campaign were strong, however, and included, for example, the borrowing of both a definition of 'functional literacy' from the United States National Reading Centre and the means of measuring 'functional literacy' from the U.S. Army (BAS, 1974:5). The central feature of the campaign, the BBC media campaign, was grant-funded by the Ford Foundation.

[18] It should be noted that much of the contact between North American and British adult literacy professionals from the late 1970s was initiated by the North American side in the wake of what was widely perceived as a 'successful' literacy campaign in Britain.

[19] As noted, Barbara Bush was a member of the board of directors of the Business Council for Effective Literacy but, as the wife of then vice-president George Bush, she had also adopted literacy as her special cause and campaigned nationally for several years. The Business Council for Effective Literacy published a picture of the 1987 Bush/Baker meeting on the front page of its newsletter in July 1989.

Representatives of ALBSU, as well as other English literacy 'experts', were frequently invited to speak at conferences and meetings in both Canada and the United States during the 1980s campaigns.

The inevitable result of the deliberate pursuit of such connections has been a tendency towards the adoption of similar strategies among educational professionals and policy makers, and the shift towards a direct linking of literacy education with employment and employability—already underway in England in response to the general political climate and government funding policies—was further supported by the North American trend. What England appears to have taken directly from the trans-Atlantic exchange, in particular, was the idea that the funding of literacy education need not be entirely (or even primarily) a public endeavour and that private enterprise might be persuaded to purchase the service. But, as in North America, businesses would first need to be persuaded that illiteracy was their problem, that workers' literacy deficiencies undermined company profitability; business associations and public policy makers and funders would, likewise, need to be persuaded that worker illiteracy in the aggregate threatened national productivity and competitiveness. By the end of the 1980s, this strategy, a fundamentally new element of literacy campaigning even in North America, was increasingly used by the central literacy agency of England and Wales, as well as by educational professionals at the local level, both to gain public support for a literacy service and to market programmes directly to employers, employer associations and Training and Enterprise Councils.

Promoting the idea of worker illiteracy in England The promotion of literacy (or 'basic skills') programmes specifically targeted at workers (either in their workplaces or off-site during working hours) was not unknown in England in the mid-1980s, though the practice was virtually confined to one voluntary agency operating in London. Workbase Training, which had evolved out of a 1978 workplace basic education project of the National Union of Public Employees, and which retained close organizational and funding links with ALBSU until the early 1990s, had operated a few programmes for manual workers primarily in the public sector throughout the 1980s. These were generally promoted in the early days as a kind of 'affirmative action/equal opportunities' measure. Public sector employers, in particular, were encouraged to address the imbalance which characterized access to training opportunities by supporting 'basic skills' programmes for manual workers. Although Workbase did not initially argue that basic skills programmes were necessary because workers' skill deficits might be a source of problems for employers, the promotion of 'basic skills' programmes did assume that, for many manual workers, other training opportunities might be inaccessible because of literacy deficiencies.

Though a few Workbase programmes were supported by employers for extended periods, the takeup among employers in general was negligible. By the late 1980s, with ALBSU support for its programmes about to be severed, Workbase had begun to market its services more aggressively. There was, in addition, increasing official and employer interest in the notion of workplace basic skills in this period. A 1988 basic education materials package for manual workers, produced by Workbase, was funded by the Local Government Training Board and supported by the Greater London

Employers Secretariat, for example (Bonnerjea and Freud, 1988). By the early 1990s, although Workbase had begun to market its services outside of London, it was no longer the only agency promoting itself as a potential provider of workplace basic skills programmes. The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit had, itself, begun to give a higher priority to workplace basic skills and, in observance of International Literacy Year (1990), literacy and work was taken as a special theme (Rees, 1990). Local educational agencies (open learning centres, adult basic education providers and further education colleges) were encouraged to become involved and Workbase was contracted, as a part of an ALBSU Special Development Project, to act as a consultant to local agencies on workplace basic skills provision. *Setting up Workplace Basic Skills Training: Guidelines for Practitioners*, a booklet describing the Workbase approach to 'selling' and delivering workplace basic skills programmes was published by ALBSU in 1990. The booklet cited Workbase research to support the claim that up to 30 percent of low paid workers (and almost 80 percent in some inner city areas) needed basic skills training (Rees, 1990:8). In 1990, ALBSU also sponsored a national employer survey, explicitly modeled on similar North American surveys, aimed at estimating the cost of workers' 'basic skills deficits' to industry. As noted in Chapter 1, the survey report concluded that such deficits cost British industry £4.8 billion annually (Kempa, 1993). As also noted in Chapter 1, other surveys and reports on worker basic skills deficits were sponsored by the Employment Department in this period as well (see Hamilton and Davies, 1990; Atkinson and Papworth, 1991). In 1991, a second major workplace literacy initiative, entitled Basic Skills at Work, was funded by ALBSU. This initiative was intended specifically to stimulate more active

engagement of Training and Enterprise Councils with the issue of worker basic skills deficits.

The American workforce literacy link was further underlined in 1992 when Thomas Sticht, by then the foremost 'expert' on workforce illiteracy and workplace literacy programming in the United States, was invited by ALBSU to visit England. An article by Sticht, detailing his 'functional context' approach to workplace literacy was subsequently featured in ALBSU's nationally distributed occasional papers publication, *Viewpoints* (Sticht, 1992). It would be published again in the December/January 1996/97 issue of the agency's newsletter, *Basic Skills*.

By 1994, the workplace literacy 'movement' had acquired a life of its own and a national network for people involved in workplace literacy was established; the inaugural issue of what would be a regular network newsletter was published in November of that year. According to the newsletter, the workplace 'basic skills training' network in 1996 included tutors, managers, unions, and Training and Enterprise Centres (TECs), among others. Marketing basic skills programmes to employers in both the private and public sectors was by now an important element of adult literacy work in England (see, for example, Mulford, 1994:4; Workplace Basic Skills Training Network Newsletter[20], various issues).

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[20] The Newsletter was named WildeBeeST (Building a Workplace Basic Skills Training Network) from its initial issue in November 1994 to the end of 1995. In 1996, the name was changed to Workplace Basic Skills Training Network. The reason for the name change, as explained in the December 1995 issue, was to ensure that the network was "... putting over the right image: as an organization which can represent our members to businesses moving into the 21st Century, and to national bodies and policy-makers. We can't afford to have potential funders thinking we're anything other than a credible national network" (page 1).

CONCLUSION

The 1980s saw a marked shift in literacy campaigning in North America from a general focus on the working class to a specific focus on the putative illiteracy of workers. This shift originated in the United States where, as this chapter has documented, it was largely a product of strategically motivated business involvement in adult literacy as a social issue; the shift was essentially replicated in Canada. Although Canada's 'crisis' has lagged slightly behind that of the United States, the process of construction has been essentially the same, and there has been a great deal of borrowing from the United States in the Canadian construction of the issue. Similar studies have been conducted and similar conclusions drawn. The roles of business, labour, advocacy groups, educationalists and the state have been essentially the same in both countries. Crucially, the lack of a media border between the two countries has meant that the American media campaign (the core of the 1980s workforce literacy campaign) has been waged in both countries simultaneously.

In the United States and Canada, workforce illiteracy has been presented in essentially the same manner. The supposed victims of illiteracy have been presented in the media campaigns as the cause of many of their employers' and their nations' economic problems. The aggressive marketing of workplace literacy programmes by would-be programme providers has entailed the overstatement of potential workplace problems and the stereotyping of all workers with low levels of formal education.

In England, the shift in the adult literacy service to a focus on the illiteracy (or 'basic skills deficits') of workers, and towards marketing the service to employers and employer organizations, took place without a renewed literacy campaign. Neither was

there an equivalent corporate philanthropic adoption of the literacy cause in England although businesses—particularly larger corporations—were similarly promoting a public image of themselves as responsible social partners, supportive (at least in principle) of human resource development programmes, including education and training. Nevertheless, in terms of its relative impact on the adult literacy service, the workforce literacy trend has been hardly less pervasive in England than in either Canada or the United States. This can be substantially explained by the nature of the political/administrative structure of England and Wales. The existence of a statutory central literacy agency, and the greater influence of central government, have allowed for a more direct process of policy adoption and adaptation—less impeded by jurisdictional limitations and the consequent need for 'consensus building'—than has been possible in either Canada or the United States. It would appear that a small core of professionals involved in the literacy service in England have been able to achieve results comparable in terms of shaping public policy to those achieved by a continent-wide campaign and hundreds of millions of dollars of promotion in North America. And, in spite of differences in the process, the transition to a narrow, utilitarian approach to adult literacy education, geared (at least in theory) to the goals of employment and enhanced work performance, has taken place more or less concurrently on both sides of the Atlantic.

This chapter has served to underline both the socially constructed and the international character of recent 'crises' of worker literacy. The next chapter seeks to explain more fully the ideological and material contexts in which claims of worker literacy crises have been accepted at face value and in which the notion of 'literacy' or 'basic

skills' programmes located at the workplace has been accepted—even embraced—by both educationalists and trades unionists.

Chapter 4

Embracing the Discourse of Worker Illiteracy
The Response of Educationalists and Organized Labour

INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter examined the social construction of workforce illiteracy as an important economic and societal problem through identifying the agencies primarily responsible for that construction. The identification of agency and motivation, in this instance, is critical to a proper understanding of the renewed period of literacy campaigning in North America and the shift towards a specific focus on worker illiteracy in both North America and England. However, as central as agency has been in this particular social construction process, it can only partially explain the extent to which that process has been successful. The receptiveness of various sectors of civil society to the central claims of the campaign is an important element of the social construction process which in large measure remains to be examined. Certainly, the power of the media to shape public opinion can to a large extent explain the wide acceptance by the general public of the 'fact' of worker illiteracy—especially given the role of the media as the central agency in the construction of that 'fact'. However, given the preponderance of evidence to the contrary (see, for example, Boothby, 1993; Livingstone, 1996; Rumberger, 1981, 1984), and considering that people's daily experiences and common sense observations might well provide evidence of an opposite problem—unemployed and underemployed college and university graduates, increasing educational criteria for even the most menial and least skilled of jobs—an explanation for the credence given to such claims must also take account of the general

material and ideological contexts in which the claims have been made and in which they have evidently made sense.

The 'new economy' context The first broad ideological context to which the workforce illiteracy arguments refer, and from which they seek corroboration, is that of the so-called 'new economy'—the constellation of ideas and arguments based on the theory of a radical break in patterns of industrial and economic activity, beginning in the 1970s (see, for example, Bell, 1973; Piore and Sabel, 1984; Huey, 1994). The ideas which underpin the 'new economy' discourse—new work organization requiring enhanced employee involvement, a general and significant rise in average skill requirements of work, and increasing need for individual initiative and resiliency—support the notion that, even if workers are not less literate than in the previous era, prior standards for literacy and skill are no longer sufficient. An analogous set of assumptions related to the decline of employment in manufacturing and resource-based industries and the parallel growth of service sector employment reinforces the 'upskilling' thesis and supports the belief that radically new definitions and standards of literacy will be required in the immediate future (Johnston and Packer, 1987; Bengtsson, 1988; Benton and Noyelle, 1992).

Human capital development and the educational reform context The second arena in which the workforce illiteracy issue has resonated, and from which it has drawn support, is the theory of human capital development and its use in the project of education reform which has engaged conservatives for most of the last three decades (Shor, 1986; Chitty, 1993; Cathcart and Esland, 1983; Wilson and Woock, 1995). One key element of the conservative critique of education, which from the late 1970s has

acquired increasing hegemony, is that education, though the primary foundation of human capital development, has failed to develop human capital in line with the needs of national economies. In the wake of the 1970s global economic crisis, education was targeted by key conservative alliances as centrally to blame for that crisis (Mathieson and Bernbaum, 1988; Cathcart and Esland, 1983).

As Brown (1994) has noted, the late twentieth century conservative critique of education is not a critique of the notion that education can and does determine national economic development; what is questioned, rather, is the efficacy of public education, as it had been organized in the post-war period (and particularly from the 1960s), in achieving desired economic objectives. The idea that the human capital function of education can be best served, not through a general expansion of education and training, centrally controlled by the state—the basis of much post-war educational policy—but by pursuing a closer fit between both the curriculum and the processes of education and the specific, self-defined needs of industry has been put forward by conservative reformers as the *sine qua non* of economic regeneration. The presumed existence of widespread illiteracy among the workforce has provided educational reformers with an important piece of evidence in support of the reformist diagnosis of education's role in productivity declines and national economic crisis. And, within the general reformist revisioning of education's relationship to industry and the economy, the idea of locating literacy programmes in workplaces and tailoring them directly to specific workplace needs has provided the ultimate education:industry fit.

The primary objective of this chapter is to examine the receptiveness of key sectors of civil society to both the rhetoric and the 'evidence' of the workforce literacy

campaigns. It focuses in particular on the responses of educationalists and organized labour, both of which, it might have been anticipated, would have responded to the broad critiques of education, on the one hand, and the quality of the labour supply, on the other, in quite different ways than they have. For trades unions and labour federations, in North America in particular, have not only largely accepted as fact the existence of widespread worker illiteracy but, in many cases, have also become active participants in the campaigns (see, for example, Turk, 1989; Sarmiento and Kay, 1990; Georgetti, 1992). And adult educationalists on both sides of the Atlantic have generally accepted—and, indeed, have been largely responsible for promulgating—the idea that literacy education for working people should be tied directly to the specific requirements of their work and that much of the literacy education which takes place outside of the work context is 'irrelevant' (see, for example, Stein, undated; Taylor et al., 1991; Bonnerjea, 1990).

The chapter begins by situating the workforce illiteracy discourse within the general ideological and material contexts in which it has been cultivated. As already noted, the two general contexts are, firstly, the discourse of the 'new economy' and the material contexts in which that discourse has been situated; and, secondly, the broad project of educational reform being pursued by conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic. The role of educationalists in the creation of the workforce illiteracy issue is examined within the context of educational reform and, in particular, the renewed emphasis on 'relevance' and the human capital function of education. The final section of the chapter examines the response of organized labour to both the claims of the workforce

literacy campaigns and the promotion of 'literacy' or 'basic skills' programmes in the workplace.

WORKFORCE ILLITERACY AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE 'NEW ECONOMY'

The 'new economy' transforms work, requires 'transformed' workers Much of the discourse about the need for a more 'literate' workforce is couched in terms of the dawn of a new economic era—one in which the only constant is change and in which working life, and adult life in general, will be a series of constant adjustments to this change. This 'new era' has many labels—including, in popular discourse, New Economy, Knowledge Society, Information Age (see Toffler, 1980; Naisbitt, 1984); in academic discourse, post-Fordism, post-industrialism (see Bell, 1973; Piore and Sabel, 1984; Atkinson and Gregory, 1986; Murray, 1988). By whatever name, the new era is held to be in sharp contrast to the one it has purportedly broken from—a long period of economic stasis supposedly characterized by mass production and unchanging and largely unfulfilling work patterns, first established in early twentieth century automobile manufacture, and maintained throughout the intervening decades by strong and combative union organization.

In the industrial or Fordist past, the new economy theorists maintain, workers could expect to be trained for (or learn from experience) one job, and to do that job for their entire working lives. In the new era, that pattern is being turned on its head. The pace of change in both the techniques and the organization of production, dictated by the changing demands of the market and rapid technological innovation, is such that workers can no longer expect any degree of continuity of employment. The constantly

changing labour needs of industry will render skills obsolete and necessitate upskilling several times during an individual's working life. New technology and changing work organization, it is claimed, will also mean that workers can expect a great deal more mobility between employers than has been the pattern in the past. This will necessitate their having a range of marketable skills and being prepared to continuously retrain for jobs as the job market dictates. Within industries, the new era will herald changes in work organization (small batch production of customized products as opposed to mass produced, standardized goods) which, it is claimed, will require workers to possess a wide range of discrete skills. The worker who may in the past have learned and perfected a skill or set of skills (or who may have had to mind one machine) will in the future be expected to be 'functionally flexible'—to move around the plant, minding a number of different machines or performing a range of unrelated and specialized tasks. Piore and Sabel (1984), among others, present the change as a new era to be welcomed by capitalists and workers alike—where work will be fulfilling and industrial relations will be consensual rather than adversarial (see also Atkinson, 1985; Atkinson and Gregory, 1986).

The bulk of official reports and academic writing on worker illiteracy directly situates the issue in this 'new economy' discourse. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, for example, in a 1992 monograph entitled *Adult Illiteracy and Economic Performance* suggested that the recent revaluing of literacy which focuses primarily on its relation to economic performance is simply a response to "important shifts in the nature of the world economy and related changes in the organization and sectoral distribution of jobs". The shift from the "Fordist era" which

"centred on the pursuit of a highly fragmented division of labor and the breakdown of work into sets of simple, easy-to-learn tasks so that workers could be made interchangeable or, for that matter, could be replaced by machinery" to the new era where the structure of production has been altered to "emphasize quality, diversification, customization, timeliness, rapid innovation, and customer service" has, the monograph asserts, important implications for the selection of workers. Industrial options include the displacement of poorly skilled workers and/or the training and retraining of the workers retained (Benton and Noyelle, 1992:13-14). The Hudson Institute of Canada, in a report on adult literacy and the economy commissioned by the Canadian government, cited another OECD report (OECD, 1986) in support of its claim that employers who, up to the present, "have been able to structure job tasks and training to accommodate basic skill deficiencies" will not be able to do so in the reorganized workplace; such a workplace will need primarily workers "with broad competence profiles and multiple skills, reaching from polyvalent team workers to 'flexible specialists'" (Drouin, 1990:18).

As many critics of the new economy thesis have observed, such scenarios present a view of the past which is overly simplified and an interpretation of the present which both exhibits an unwarranted optimism and disregards many of the most pronounced trends in both the organization of work and employment growth patterns (see, for example, Clarke, 1990: Pollert, 1991; MacDonald, 1991). As Pollert notes, for example, the "radical break" theory rests in large measure on characterizations of the past, "... whether of Fordism, 'mass production' or old management style" which are "vague, inaccurate or caricatured" (1991:xviii). The same may be said of characteriz-

ations of the 'transformed' present and the idealized future. Neo-liberal economic policies and the unfettered global migration of capital in the quest for maximum profitability have had profound impacts on employment in western countries—not primarily, however, of the kind envisaged in material such as that presented by the OECD. 'Functional flexibility' and new workplace organization including 'multi-tasking' and the organization of work into teams do, indeed, make new demands of workers; but, as several analysts have pointed out, these demands commonly constitute labour intensification rather than the use of new (and properly rewarded) skills (Pollert, 1988; Elger, 1991). As many have observed, 'flexibility' as a feature of the introduction of new technology or the reorganization of the labour process, usually includes 'numerical flexibility'—either permanent labour shedding or the increased utilization of temporary and part-time workers, subject to layoff and recall at short notice and with few of the benefits of a permanent workforce (see, for example, Hyman, 1988).

Growth in service sector employment is equated with significant increase in 'average' skill Another feature of the 'new economy', which is conventionally presented as evidence of the increased need for well educated (and continuously 'upskilled') workers is the relative growth of employment in the service sector and the parallel decline of manufacturing sector jobs (see, for example, Johnston and Packer, 1987; Benton and Noyelle, 1992). This set of arguments generally conflates all service sector employment with employment in the high technology end of the service sector—financial and computing services, for example. The argument that the majority of workers in the 'new economy' will be 'knowledge workers' is based on the assumption that, while the jobs which have been lost in manufacturing have been primarily low-

skill jobs, those which are being retained, as well as those which are being created in the service sector, require relatively much more skill. Computerized inventory control, statistical process control, and word processing, for example, are all assumed to require a greater degree of worker skill than did the labour processes they have replaced. The growth in service sector jobs, and the visible presence in a large proportion of such jobs of computerized technology, is also cited to support a general 'upskilling' thesis.

Braverman's 1974 critique of the process of job/skill classification in America is especially helpful in understanding the basis for such assumptions. The core assumption—that a connection with machinery (or 'technology') is, in itself, a criterion of skill—was first entrenched in the 1930s revision of occupational classifications in the United States and, as Braverman notes, the statistical process whereby skill levels are assumed to rise in proportion to the density of machinery or technology has been "automatic ever since, without reference to the actual exercise or distribution of 'skills' (1974: 428-429). Another basis for current claims that work in general is in the process of pronounced upskilling is the substantial growth of specialized work, particularly in the so-called 'information technology' and financial services sectors. The underlying assumption of such claims relates to the notion of 'average skill', another concept which Braverman has critiqued. As Braverman has argued, the "scientific and 'educated' content of labor" does not tend towards averaging, but towards polarization. As he observes, most workers "gain nothing from the fact that the decline in their command over the labor process is more than compensated for by the increasing command on the part of managers and engineers. ... The more science is incorporated into the labor process, the less the worker understands of the process; the

more sophisticated an intellectual process the machine becomes, the less control and comprehension of the machine the worker has" (ibid:424-26). Yet the conventional wisdom which Braverman so astutely analyzed two decades ago remains firmly entrenched. And much of the empirical evidence for increasing general skill requirements of work is based on the fact that more of the labour process involves some connection with computers.

At another level, the claims of rising skill which simply invoke the growth of the service sector are entirely related to assumptions about manual labour. As in earlier decades, a shift from manual or 'blue collar' work to clerical or 'white collar' work is taken implicitly to indicate a rise in the level of skill required to do the work, without regard for the actual skill levels of the jobs. As Braverman argued in that instance, the degree of skill required to perform a job is not self-evident from the classification of a job (as 'blue collar' or 'white collar', for example); nor, as we can conclude from current evidence on employment shifts, is it evident from the employment sector, although service sector employment continues to be presented as synonymous with relatively more skilled work and manufacturing sector employment as synonymous with relatively less skilled work. There is a substantial body of evidence to indicate that, in fact, the relative decline of so-called 'unskilled' jobs in the mass production manufacturing sector—resulting not only from the adoption of labour displacing technologies but also from the relocation of companies to low-wage regions or countries—has not resulted in a net decrease in low-skill work. For much of the employment growth in the service sector in both North America and England over the past decade has been due to a significant expansion of unskilled and poorly rewarded

work. And, indeed, growing service sector employment for the relatively less skilled has tended to be more exploitative than the manufacturing jobs which they replace, characterized by very high rates of part-time work, low wages and few or no benefits of employment beyond the legislated minima (Hunsley, 1989; Mishel and Teixeira, 1991; Livingstone, 1996; Little, 1997).

Capitalist restructuring tends to shed rather than 'remake' the least educated and least skilled It may be argued that situating the discussion of undereducated workers within the 'new economy' discourse is fundamentally dishonest. For, if there has been a significant change in the nature of employment in western countries, the implications of that change for the least formally educated can hardly be disputed; it is not that their work has become more skilled, that they are required to be 'polyvalent team workers' or 'flexible specialists', but that they have lost their work. For the dominant impact of capitalist restructuring in the period since the early 1970s economic crisis has been rising unemployment; the manufacturing sector, where the most intensive job shedding has taken place, is also the sector which had employed those with less formal qualifications in the greatest number. Indeed, this is not a new phenomenon, though it has been exacerbated in recent decades by neo-liberal economic and trade policies.[1]

Whether in the manufacturing sector or elsewhere, it is those with the lowest levels of qualification—in terms of either educational attainment or formally accredited skill—who are the most vulnerable when jobs are eliminated (Rainbird, 1991; Atkinson and Papworth, 1991). As early as the mid-nineteenth century, U.S. manufacturing

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[1] Labour displacing technologies in the agricultural sector of the southern United States, and the consequent unemployment and migration of thousands of southern farm workers in the 1950s, was the context for the first extensive literacy campaigning aimed at American-born adults (Hilliard, 1964).

employers were demonstrating a bias towards 'educated' labour, those who had at least had an introduction to Common School education (Graff, 1979). The massive expansion of public schooling throughout the twentieth century, and the continuous rise in average levels of schooling, has seen this bias flourish. By the end of the 1960s, the median years of schooling of the employed civilian population in the United States was 12.4 (Braverman, 1974:436). And, as both Braverman and Berg (1970) have documented, there was already an oversupply of college-trained people in that country by the late 1960s. One consequence of the ever increasing educational attainment levels of the labour supply has been that employers have tailored their screening processes to reflect the degree of choice they are able to exercise. High school graduation had, thus, become the minimum requirement for a majority of jobs in North America by the mid-1970s, not because of the educational requirements of the work but because of the wide availability of high school graduates (Braverman, 1974; Rumberger, 1981, 1984; Livingstone, 1996). For those with less than a high school graduation, as well as for those whose proficiency in the language of the workplace is less than full, the pool of available jobs has shrunk in parallel with the increasing availability of high school and college educated applicants. In North America in particular those with high school graduation and less have seen their wages (and general standard of living) decline significantly over the past two decades (Mishel and Teixera, 1991; Rumberger, 1981, 1984).

One response to the overall decline in wages (and general standard of living) and the relative increase in 'bad jobs' (part time and temporary, minimum waged, few or no other benefits) has been the implicit blaming of the victims. This is expressed in

the familiar low skill/low wage:high skill/high wage theory. The theory assumes that the wages, benefits and other factors which determine the quality of work closely reflect the skills which the worker brings to the job. Its primary application is at the aggregate level—nations, it is assumed, can either compete on the basis of high skills with other high skill (high value added) nations or they can 'race to the bottom' in competition with 'low skill/low wage' nations. Proponents of the theory include, in America, Robert Reich, the Secretary of Labor during the first term of the Clinton Administration and Tony Sarmiento, the Education Director of the AFL-CIO and, in England, the Trades Union Congress (see Reich, 1992; Sarmiento, 1991; Trades Union Congress, 1989).

The theory is also applied at the level of the workplace. Thomas Sticht (1996), for example, an American workplace literacy theorist, has argued that the way in which a business or industry develops (whether it utilizes high level skills or, on the contrary, deskills work; whether it pays well or not) is little more than an organic response to the attitudes, values and skill levels of the workforce. High skilled workers generate 'well-paying, high performance jobs'. So-called 'low skilled' workers, one may assume, are also ultimately responsible for their poor pay and conditions. Many labour organizations have, in fact, endorsed the basic premise: that a supply of highly skilled workers will transform capitalist workplaces into high skill/high wage enterprises and that, in the aggregate, highly skilled workers will ensure that their nation competes with similarly highly skilled nations (see, for example, Sarmiento, 1991).

The 'high skill/high wage' theory rests on what Brown has termed the 'fallacy of composition', the assumption that "if high wages are paid to educated workers, all

workers can be highly paid if their skills are upgraded" (1994:610). Proponents of the theory in general fail to consider either the socially constructed element of the definition and valuing of skill or the degree to which wages and benefits are determined by factors other than the skill of the worker or the value added to a product.[2] Critics of the high skill/high wage theory have noted that wages (and the general standard of living) in the United States, for example, have declined steadily over the past two decades even as the workforce has become better educated (Mishel and Teixera, 1991; Rumberger, 1984). In general, the wages and benefits attached to a job are as much a function of the ascriptive qualities of workers (ethnicity and gender, for example) as of the degree of skill embedded in the job[3] (see, for example, Cockburn, 1983; Phillips and Taylor, 1980; Dunk, 1996). And labour legislation and the density and strength of union organization are two factors which directly affect the extent to which workers' skills are adequately compensated or not.[4]

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[2] As Brown observes, for example, "some groups of knowledge workers are paid high wages precisely because their experience, skills and insights are a scarce commodity; or because groups regulate supply of new recruits in order to maintain high wages" (1994:610).

[3] A National Alliance of Business (1996) report on median earnings in the United States in 1994, for example, while concluding that earnings are "directly tied to education", actually documents earnings for females trailing earnings for men at all levels of educational attainment. The highest discrepancies are at the lower levels of educational attainment. Median wages for males with high school graduation or less are approximately double the median for females with equivalent levels of education. However, median wages for females with bachelors and masters degrees also trail those of males with equivalent education by 30 to 40 percent. Similarly, a 1995 report by the Associated Press noted that college educated black men earned 29 percent less than their white counterparts in professional and sales jobs in 1993. And, although black Americans had significantly higher levels of educational attainment in 1994 than they had had in 1980, the median income of black families had not changed over that period—and, indeed, had not changed significantly since 1969 (*The Globe and Mail,* 1995b).

[4] Judis has noted of the United States, for example, that unionized workers have typically earned 25 percent more than their non-unionized counterparts. Wage declines in the United States in the 1979 to 1989 period (12.7 percent decline for workers will high school diplomas), he argued, could be attributed in large part to the 15 percent decline in union membership in the same period (1994:21).

WORKFORCE ILLITERACY AND THE EDUCATIONAL REFORM CONTEXT

The pursuit of 'relevance' in school curricula and recurrent 'vocationalism'

Demands for more 'relevance' in school curricula have provided common ground for a wide range of critics of public schooling virtually since the time of the establishment of public education systems. At various times, this has given rise to calls for a renewed emphasis on the 'skilling' potential of education. In the United States, in particular, concern with so-called 'relevance' has supported recurrent 'vocational' or 'career' education movements throughout the twentieth century (Grubb and Lazerson, 1975; Shor, 1986). Many have criticized the success of such programmes, even within their own terms. Programmes designated 'vocational' or 'career' (or by any other such label) are almost exclusively targeted at 'low achievers' and their dominant effect is to further entrench the social class discrimination of schooling[5] (Grubb and Lazerson, 1975; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Clarke and Willis, 1984; Finn, 1987; Shilling, 1989). Indeed, employers and employer groups have themselves displayed little consistency in defining or articulating their needs or expectations of public educational systems. While a narrow 'vocationalism' is advocated at one time, a return to the 'academic basics' is called for at another (Grubb and Lazerson, 1975; Rothwell, 1993). This remains true in the current period; while some business sectors have advocated a

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[5] Grubb and Lazerson have argued that 1960s educational legislation in the U.S. "focused vocational training on the educationally and economically disadvantaged, as a means both to reduce technological unemployment and to integrate these groups into the occupational structure" (1975:459). Bowles and Gintis argue that the vocational education movement in the U.S. has been "less a response to ... specific training needs ... than an accommodation of a previously elite educational institution—the high school—to the changing needs of reproducing the class structure" (1976:194). Moore has observed of England that programmes which seek to tie school curricula more closely to 'the world of work' in general have little to do with work but are "best understood as responses to control problems within the schools". He cites the instances of the 1972/73 raising of the school leaving age and the rise in unemployment in the late 1970s as examples of the use of work-related programmes for such a purpose (1984:65).

narrower focus on job-related skills, others have called for a broad education which encourages critical thinking, innovation and 'risk taking'.

From the mid-1970s, the assumption that the quality of the labour supply was a root cause of industrial decline and economic crisis underlined efforts to reform schooling in ways which would more directly serve the needs and interests of business and industry. In England, then Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan voiced concern that some schools "may have over-emphasised the importance of preparing boys and girls for their roles in society compared with the need to prepare them for their economic roles" (in *Times Educational Supplement*, 22 October 1976, quoted in Finn, 1987:107). As Finn notes, Callaghan concluded that there was "no virtue in producing socially well adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills" (ibid). Indeed, the conflict over the socialization function of schooling (as against either a broad meritocratic or a direct labour market preparation function) was not new to the 1970s. The United States had had its own 'great debate' in the immediate post-World War II period over what a reformist report from the 1980s would refer to as the "life adjustment craze" (National Advisory Council on Adult Education, undated). That debate was reinvigorated in the wake of the 1970s economic crisis; and, indeed, much of the critique which has informed the renewed period of literacy campaigning since the early 1980s has been couched in terms of the assumed overemphasis on the socializing function of schooling (see, for example, The National Advisory Council on Adult Education, undated.)

On both sides of the Atlantic, the values and curricula of schooling began to be criticised from the early 1970s as inimical to the successful assimilation of students

into employment. Teachers, it was claimed, were at best ignorant of the 'world of work'; at worst, they were inculcating anti-business values and beliefs (Finn, 1987; Shor, 1986). A major focus of educational reform in the intervening period has been on the establishment of a vigorously pro-business bias in school curricula and of a direct role for representatives of capital in both the management of schools and the development and delivery of that curricula (Nordgren and Gabriel, 1981; Shew, 1990; Hirsch, 1992). The proliferation of 'work experience' and vocationally oriented programmes for youth, both in and out of school, in Canada and the United States as well as England attests to the ideological success of this reforming movement.[6] For adults, the renewed privileging of capital's role has been manifested in the withdrawal of the state from active labour market planning and the adoption of market driven (and employer mediated) approaches to the production and reproduction of skill.[7]

Educational reform geared towards a closer fit between schooling and work has not been confined to the development of specific 'vocational' or 'work experience' programmes or the structured incorporation of capital into the running of schools, the development of training policy, and the mediation of training programmes and credentialing, however. It has also sought to reshape both curricula and pedagogical processes across the broad spectrum of education and training. The success of this reforming effort is evidenced in the growth of a number of trends in education and

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[6] These include, for example, the Youth Training Scheme (in its various forms) and the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative in England; 'cooperative education' programmes in both Canada and the United States; and various 'pre-vocational' and 'enterprise education' programmes in all three countries.

[7] Employment Training in England, the Job Training Partnership Act in the United States, and the Canadian Job Strategy in Canada are all examples of these trends in the 1980s. In the United States and England, the centrality of capital's role has been ensured through structures such as the Training and Enterprise Councils and Private Industry Councils, for example.

training, including 'outcomes-based learning' and the use of 'performance indicators' in the assessment of learning. Many of these so-called 'innovations' are variants of the 'competency-based learning' model which originated in the United States and which, over the past two decades, has found wide application in Britain, Canada and Australia. Their appeal in the current period lies in the combination of essentially behaviourist pedagogy (which promises to produce 'goal oriented', 'problem solving' individuals) and managerial efficiency (which promises to make education accountable not only for its 'product' but also for its costs) (Jackson, 1987, 1990).

Workforce illiteracy/workplace literacy and schooling for the world of work Much of the debate about 'illiteracy' in the employed workforce—in North America in particular—has been couched in terms of the 'dysfunctionality' of school-based learning. Schools, it is claimed, fail to provide a meaningful 'context' for the teaching of basic skills. 'Contextualization' has replaced 'relevance' as the buzzword of the 1980s. One of the most widely cited sources of evidence that schools fail to 'contextualize' reading and writing—and, consequently, fail to teach students to use reading and writing meaningfully in the 'real world'—was produced in 1981 by Larry Mikulecky, who would become one of America's foremost experts on workplace literacy in the following decade. Sponsored by the National Institute of Education, Mikulecky's study examined "literacy demands, abilities, and strategies in both schools and the workplace" (1981:174). On the basis of the material typically read by selected samples of high school students and workers, the study claimed to show that all classes of workers did more reading on a daily basis than did students in the course of their

school day[8]; that workers used reading for more practical purposes (manuals, tables, graphs, and the like) than did students, who used "texts" almost exclusively and mainly for "learning facts" (ibid:179); and that workers read *better* than students—by which was not meant that workers gained more meaning but that they read to a very specific purpose, frequently only skimming material to gain the necessary information. Students, it was concluded, *read to learn* while workers *read to do*. Though the study concluded little more than this rather obvious difference between schooling and the 'world of work', it would be used over the next decade to illustrate the unproductive nature of school learning. The rather facile reading to learn/reading to do distinction, with its implicit valuing (the former somehow 'dysfunctional' and 'unproductive'; the latter 'functional' and 'productive') would become something of a mantra in the growing field of workplace literacy. One of Mikulecky's conclusions was that, as students must learn to 'read to do' in order to prepare themselves to be productive workers, schools should collect materials from workplaces and use them as the basis of reading instruction.

The notion that 'relevance' or 'contextualization' of learning can be achieved through centring educational programmes on the world of work has been carried even further by Thomas Sticht, another of America's new workplace literacy 'experts'. Sticht's 'functional context education' is based entirely on a task-oriented approach to the teaching of reading; students read well only when they are reading to do some-

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[8] The evidence for this was entirely based on worker and student self reports of time spent reading. It is far from conclusive since workers included (and one may assume were encouraged to include) all the reading they did including notices, labels and the like. The high school students, on the other hand, evidently reported only time spent in concentrated reading since they reported reading on average 98 minutes per day, 45 minutes less than the average time spent by workers (Mikulecky, 1981:176).

thing. His concept of the purpose of education is equally narrow. He recommends that schools teach students what he terms "workplace multicultural education"—each workplace constituting a "subculture" of the larger business/industrial culture (1996:11). The aim of this 'workplace multicultural education', he asserts, is "to permit learners to acquire the attitudes, knowledge and skills needed to *behave and perform well* in the subcultures of various businesses or industries". In order to facilitate this, he advises, schools should "organise learning around the world of work and teach students how to negotiate the needs (of the various business and industrial subcultures)". This approach, which he terms a *performance* orientation, is contrasted with the typical "*topic* or *subject matter* orientation" of schools, an orientation which has the goal of having students acquire knowledge rather than "perform in some well specified social role or subcultural setting" (ibid).

The depoliticized workplace The presentation of workplaces as ideal locations for the delivery of adult literacy education fundamentally depoliticizes the labour/capital relationship. In the majority of cases, it both endorses the current conservative goal of consensual industrial relations and promises to facilitate the achievement of that goal (see, for example, Taw, 1990; Stein, undated). In the most extreme expressions of the idealization of capitalism in workplace literacy discourse, the workplace ceases to be the property of the employer and becomes a community of equals. Work is not organized by employers for the maximization of profit but is a natural outcome of the aggregate skills and values which workers bring to their workplaces. Sticht, again, presents a particularly fantastical and depoliticized version of this idealization. The "world of work", he maintains, is "an expression of the values and intellectual capac-

ities of the individuals that constitute society" (1996:10). According to Sticht, workers "organize themselves into a business or industry", in the process creating "... within the larger culture a subculture organised by the particular products or services they provide, and their beliefs, attitudes and cognitive abilities, including the technological knowledge that permits them to use various tools needed to accomplish the work of the business. They also develop social roles and status, with their own modes of dress, ways of behaving, special language and knowledge and skill requirements" (ibid).

Both Sticht's and Mikulecky's work represent the extreme view of schooling as 'functional' preparation for the world of work. Theirs is a total indictment of liberal education; absent from their 'theories' is any notion of education's role in the broad project of the development of a just society, for example.[9] There is no role in their educational model for critical thinking, except as it enables students to become 'problem solvers' in their future work roles. The development of knowledge, beyond learning the bases of "behave[ing] and perform[ing] well" in a variety of work "subcultures" is dismissed as irrelevant—merely "subject matter" or "facts". Yet, though they represent the extreme view in educational reform discourse, Sticht and Mikulecky are *the* central theorists of workforce/workplace literacy. Both have played important roles in the workforce literacy campaigns—Sticht, for example, headed California's state workplace literacy task force; Mikulecky designed a workplace programme for Indiana state employees (BCEL, No. 29, October, 1991) and he acted as the 'expert' advisor to the government-funded Canadian Business Task Force on

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[9] Indeed, as John Tomlinson notes, the 1980s saw a general eclipsing of such conceptions of the role of education. "Maintaining a competitive edge" became, in itself, the national objective—a phenomenon which he describes as "the reversal of means and ends" (quoted in Brown, 1994:608).

Literacy. As previously noted, Sticht's theory of 'functional context education' has been published by the central literacy agency in England at least twice, the second time under the banner 'Lessons from the U.S.' (see Sticht, 1992, 1996).

The response of educationalists: pragmatic strategy or ideological capitulation? In respect of England, Cohen has noted that the opposition of teachers (and trades unions) to the "new vocationalism" of the 1980s was divided and weak largely because of the failure of both groups to "contest the ideological ground" first "staked out" in the 1970s "great debate" (1984:105). The same may be said of adult educationalists' response to both the workforce literacy campaigns and the movement, on both sides of the Atlantic, to locate literacy programmes in workplaces. A 1992 OECD report on adult literacy education describes the shifting position of adult educationalists. Though noting that many "continue to resist recasting their programmes to make them more effective", it claimed, nevertheless, that many others "who once resented any emphasis on the economic impact of literacy training have come to recognize that the best pedagogical methods often include, or even focus on, the working lives and economic goals of learners" (Benton and Noyelle, 1992:9).

As Chapter 3 discussed, public education systems at all levels of provision came under increasing financial strain from the early 1970s. The conservative backlash against the 1960s expansion of spending on education, combined with economic downturn, saw most jurisdictions cut (or cap) educational expenditures (Useem, 1986; Johnson, 1989). In the face of dramatically reduced public funding, educationalists were frequently obliged to accept other sources of financing, where this was an option, simply to stem the inevitable erosion of the education service. Although many in the

education profession initially resisted the encroachment of business and industry into their schools and classrooms, the position became more difficult to sustain as resources were depleted. Years of underfunding had begun to take their toll on both infrastructure and resources by the early 1980s and, for many schools, business funding was frequently the only funding on offer. Useem's (1986) report of a New England bank chairman's remarks at a 1983 conference on 'excellence' in education indicates that a change in American educationalists' response to business was already well underway at that time. Boston educationalists, the banker stated, had previously resisted "cooperative efforts" with industry. "For years", he noted, it had been "a one-way partnership at many schools, with teachers and principals fighting the business involvement. Attempts to sit down with school officials and try and work out ways in which a business could be helpful to a school often resulted in demands simply for money and complete rejection of any input from the businesses as to how that money would be spent. In some cases headmasters wouldn't even come to the table until they had been ordered by the Superintendent" (quoted in Useem, 1986:122).

Of course, by the early 1980s, the sheer scope of business penetration of education and the official sanction it received from all levels of government would have made outright resistance difficult if not, indeed, politically unwise for individual educationalists. Through such programmes as 'Adopt-a-School', businesses in the United States enjoyed virtually unrestricted access to students, parents and teachers (see, for example, Nordgren and Gabriel, 1981). And, though blatant commercial targeting of schools continued to meet with resistance in some places, the ideological battle had been largely won by the late 1980s. School/industry 'partnerships' abounded on both sides

of the Atlantic and educationalists themselves developed courses teaching entrepreneurial values and attitudes, and celebrating the lives of businessmen (see, for example, Hirsch, 1992).

Of all areas of educational provision, adult education has always been the most susceptible to shifting public policies and ideological trends. Public funding, where it exists, has generally supported only a skeletal organization for the delivery of an adult education service. The bulk of the service has had to be self-supporting through the levy of tuition fees, which has meant that adult educationalists have always had to market their services. The adult literacy service, which has catered to the most marginalized of the population, has arguably fared worst of all. Unable to recover costs from an overwhelmingly poor clientele, and lacking a broad base of support among either the general public or policy makers, it has had to continually 'reinvent' itself in order to maintain even minimal funding commitments. Because employment in the adult literacy service is generally so unstable and so poorly rewarded, there has not developed either a profession or a body of theory which might provide a perspective from which to critique new trends in policy or practice.

In general, adult literacy educationalists have appeared extraordinarily open to a radical revisioning of the aims and objectives of literacy education in the context of the workforce literacy campaigns—both embracing the renewed human capital emphasis and lending it legitimacy. Perhaps owing to the relative absence of a professional identification—and, also, no doubt, to the financial instability of a 'career' in such a marginalized service—adult literacy organizers and teachers have frequently appeared eager to identify themselves with the 'corporate world'. In England, for example, the

Workbase Trade Union Education and Basic Skills Project was renamed Workbase Training in the late 1980s and has since cultivated a decidedly corporate image. A 1991 report on their activities in the *Guardian* newspaper (Weston, 1991) drew a distinction between the agency's staff and educationalists. Educationalists, it asserted, "were clueless about teaching in the workplace". The director of the agency was quoted: "Our people have to be multi-skilled too—negotiating with management one day, teaching the next, talking to shop stewards, dealing with supervisors who don't want to release staff." In another report on Workbase Training, an agency representative observed that, for most practitioners of adult education, workplace education was a completely new idea, "as are the other recent organizational changes brought about by bringing a market approach to the public sector" (Taw, 1991:360). "It is puzzling to many," she noted, "to envisage making money out of illiteracy and out of manual workers" (ibid).

An account in the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit's Winter 1994 Newsletter, by a coordinator of workplace basic skills in Suffolk, displayed an unabashed admiration for the ways of the corporate world and a determination to conform to what she perceived as the "professional image" local business would expect and respond to (Mulford, 1994). This included producing advertising brochures "to a highly professional standard" using "glossy headed paper ... so thick that it jammed" one of the office printers of the county basic skills service. In acknowledgment of the difference between the "worlds of education and the workplace", she says she also changed her "working style, dress style and the language [she used]". If employers "saw what they were familiar with", she wrote, she felt the project "would gain credibility with them".

The "differences between the world of work and the world of education" also included different deadlines, she noted. The "real world" as she referred to business, "tends to start its day rather early" and, if educationalists are going to succeed in their new relations with business, it is implied, they will have to march to their tune. A certain servility is evident in her account: "A tentative phone call to complete the arrangements resulted in a request for me to travel to the other side of the county by 9:00 the next morning. I went."

In North America, the same attitudes are typically exhibited in the marketing of the adult literacy service to business (see, for example, McIntyre, 1991; Waugh, 1992). Presentations are frequently designed specifically to capture the attention of corporate managers, generally claiming more attention and more financing than is otherwise usual for this generally under-resourced and decidedly substandard sector of education.[10] Perhaps not surprisingly, the pages of the newsletter of the U.S. Business Council for Effective Literacy documented a steady defection of senior state-level literacy personnel to the ranks of the 'workplace literacy consultancy' business from the late 1980s.

The continuing appeal of 'relevance': adult literacy and opposition to 'institutional' education One of the most striking aspects of the trend among adult educationalists to accept the workplace as an appropriate site for adult literacy programmes has been the generalized character of that acceptance. Even among those who would consider

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[10] As Chapter 6 documents, educationalists have also made a practice of tailoring their sales pitch to appeal to the concerns and values of employers. The focus of the majority of presentations to managers is on the impact of illiteracy on the 'bottom line' and the potential for literacy or 'basic skills' instruction to improve employee performance and attitude.

themselves progressive adult educationalists, few reservations are voiced about the trend. And, indeed, some so-called progressives are among the foremost proponents of workplace literacy, taking their places on the boards of business literacy organizations alongside corporate executives.[11] Evidently, few see the contradictions inherent in the espousal of a 'grass roots' ideology on the one hand and the promotion of a workplace-based (and frequently employer controlled) literacy service on the other hand. This may be explained in part by the persistence of the concept of 'relevance' with respect to the education of the working class.

For, in spite of recurrent problems with the project of relating the schooling of the 'disadvantaged' working class more closely to the 'world of work', the pursuit of 'relevance', nevertheless has remained a compelling idea for many in both organized labour and education. And neither the diagnosis of widespread worker illiteracy—understood, at least in part, as an outcome of the 'irrelevancy' of much of the content of schooling—nor the promotion of workplace literacy programmes as the optimal response to the putative problem mark a significant shift for many of those most outspoken on the subject of adult literacy education. Indeed, much of the practice of adult literacy, particularly since the 1970s development of 'community-based' literacy programmes run by voluntary organizations, has defined itself in opposition to public ('institutionalized') adult education. The opposition has, in part, derived from the left critique of schooling as a central element of the sorting and

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[11] In Canada, for example, Frontier College and the Ontario Literacy Coalition, both of which would characterize themselves as 'grass roots' organizations, have been among the chief proponents of workplace literacy programmes. Individuals from both organizations have also been involved with the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy and its later incarnation, ABC Canada. In both Canada and the United States, the principal labour federations have also embraced the workplace as an ideal location for adult literacy programmes and have supported ABC Canada and the U.S. Business Council for Effective Literacy.

selecting function of capitalist labour markets (see, for example, Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Jencks et al., 1972). Its closest associations, however, have been with the 'deschoolers' who have advanced an essentially libertarian political philosophy and have advocated the removal of both the state and professionals from the educational endeavour.[12] For many voluntary groups and organizations involved in the provision of adult literacy programs, the rejection of public institutions and professionals is, of course, little more than a rationalization for their own existence. In North America, in particular, the public financing of private, voluntary organizations in the adult literacy service has created a robust movement against public provision and for the continuation of the conditions which allow those organizations to exist (see, for example, Hoddinott and Overton, 1996).

To a certain extent, these critiques have also featured in the development of trades unions' positions on adult education, particularly in the development of policy on literacy programmes for workers in the past decade. The streaming function of schools and the perceived elitism of academic curricula have both been cited by trades unionists as causes of worker 'illiteracy'; and the assumed role of schools, and professional teachers, in the creation of the problem has also been used to argue against a role for professional adult educationalists and public institutions in the delivery of educational programmes for those workers (see, for example, Turk, 1989).

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[12] Ivan Illich, in *Deschooling Society* (1970) and again, with Etienne Verne, in *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom* (1976) rejected the basic tenets of progressive liberalism. He called for the abolition of schools and attacked teachers, as representatives of what he termed the "disabling professions" (Illich et al., 1977), for producing docile and manipulable consumers. His analysis, and even his language, has fed into the New Right attacks on the welfare state. For a critique of Illich, see Bowles and Gintis (1976).

In many cases, individuals who in the 1970s had regarded literacy as the foundation of participative citizenship and had espoused politically grounded literacy programmes based (at least nominally) on the ideas of the radical Brazilian educationalist, Paulo Freire, were quick to endorse the notion of locating literacy programmes in the workplace and tying them directly to the 'relevant' context of work. In some cases, individuals and groups who had organized and delivered adult literacy programmes as exercises in 'community development' were among the first to champion the workplace as an ideal location for literacy education. And many organizations which had eschewed 'institutional' adult literacy education as merely perpetuating the curricular 'irrelevance' and the 'disempowerment' of the schooling which had purportedly caused the 'illiteracy' in the first place came to view the workplace as a new frontier for 'community-based' literacy and 'popular education' (see, for example, Turk and Unda, 1990). Such views imply an acceptance of the central role of paid employment (and the employer) as the arbiter of relevance; they also implicitly devalue the relevance of citizenship, parenting and the various other roles which adults fill in their lives.

Remarkably, one of the key labour organizations involved in workplace literacy programmes in North America has regularly contrasted the threatening aspect of public educational institutions (schools and colleges) with the more benign climate of workplaces. The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) argues that the workplace, unlike schools and colleges, constitutes a "community", a place where individuals share "similar backgrounds and concerns" (Turk, 1989). The workplace, where workers have a "serious longer-term commitment and tangible, practical needs" is an "ideal" location, in contrast to schools or colleges, for worker literacy programmes (ibid). The argu-

ments put forward by Turk, then the OFL's Director of Education, against public educationalists and schools being involved in workplace literacy are hardly less depoliticised than Thomas Sticht's workplace as 'subculture' argument. Whereas schools, he argues, still "produce feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, rejection and irrelevance" for many workers, the workplace by contrast is a place where "adults can learn in an atmosphere with which they are familiar and in which they feel competent" (ibid:3). Ignoring the whole basis for workers participating in workplace literacy programmes, he goes on to claim that while the "feelings of incompetence growing out of years in school are not easily undone", the workplace, on the other hand, "is where most people feel confident and proud of what they can do. A place in which a learner feels comfortable and self-confident is important for successful learning" (ibid). In this and subsequent statements of the OFL position, the argument is made that worker literacy programmes are best delivered, not by educationalists, but by fellow workers who "share the life experiences of the learners" (Turk and Unda, 1991:273). The same rationale supported the adoption of a union-run, peer tutoring model for the educational upgrading of fisheries workers on the east coast of Canada (Johnston, 1996). As Chapter 7 discusses, the 'peer tutoring' model for the delivery of workplace literacy programmes is, in fact, used quite widely in North America by both labour organizations/trades unions and volunteer literacy organizations.

Workforce Illiteracy/Workplace Literacy: The Response of Organized Labour

The second part of this chapter explores the response of organized labour to both the construction of a worker literacy problem and the growing consensus that literacy

programming located in the workplace is the most appropriate way to address this problem. Though trades unionists have in some cases disputed the notion of workers' culpability in economic decline, industrial accidents and the range of other supposed impacts of worker illiteracy, they have generally failed to counter the claim that worker illiteracy is widespread. In fact, trades unionists, like educationalists, have in many instances been central to the promotion of worker illiteracy as a problem and have been generally supportive of the notion of locating worker literacy programmes in workplaces.

Organized labour joins the fight against worker 'illiteracy' In the United States and Canada, a number of trades unions as well as the principal labour federations (the Canadian Labour Congress and the American Federation of Labour-Confederation of Industrial Organizations), became participants in the campaigns to create a public issue of worker illiteracy. Many, including the Canadian Labour Congress and several of its member federations, would also become directly involved in the provision of literacy programmes at the workplace. In England, trades unions have not become extensively involved in the promotion of the notion of a workforce literacy crisis. In the absence of a broad-based campaign around the issue such as has taken place in North America, however, it is not possible to draw any conclusion from this. The workplace literacy delivery agency, Workbase Training, originated in 1978 as an initiative of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and, although it became an independent agency shortly after its formation, NUPE has continued to have representation on its manage-ment board. The new public sector union, UNISON (which includes the former NUPE) continues the connection with Workbase Training, and the Trades Union

Congress is cited as a supporter in its promotional literature—as, indeed, is the Confederation of British Industry.[13] At the level of the workplace in England, there has been more direct involvement of trades union representatives; in several of the workplace literacy programmes investigated for this study, shop stewards played key roles in initiating programmes—which included, centrally, persuading employers that there was a problem—and in persuading union members to come forward for tuition.

THE CONTEXT: UNION INVOLVEMENT IN TRAINING

Trades Union endorsement of human capital theory Trades unions in both North America and England have tended to endorse the human capital theory of economic growth and regeneration. As Rainbird and Vincent note, for example, both the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress have seen the low level of skills within the labour force as locking the British economy into competition with "low wage, mass producers" rather than high wage, high productivity producers" (1996:141). The Trades Union Congress position, as outlined in its 1989 report *Skills 2000*, is that Britain's current "skills challenge" is "greater than any since the Industrial Revolution". By the year 2000, the report predicted, Britain would be "either a superskills economy, or a low-skill, low pay society" (Trades Union Congress, 1989, quoted in National Commission on Education, 1993:29). Similarly, in the United States, the AFL-CIO has argued that creating a highly skilled workforce is the only way that American workers can compete internationally and maintain a reasonable standard of living.

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[13] The promotional kit, *Implementing Training and Development for employers and supervisors*, for example, has an endorsement of Workbase from the General Secretary of the TUC on its front cover. Below it is a statement by the Director General of the CBI attesting to the necessity of training at all levels of the workforce. Both organizations are listed, on the inside cover, as active supporters.

Increased training for 'high performance' work is seen as a means of countering the declining position of American workers (Sarmiento, 1991; Sarmiento and Schurman, 1992). The Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre, a nationally representative business/labour body mandated by the federal government to address labour market issues, asserted in a 1991 report on the subject that training is "critical to improving Canada's economic performance" and "plays a vital role in increasing productivity and enhancing employment and income security" (CLMPC, 1991:7). In all of these formulations, training is perceived not only as a benefit which may advantage a worker in the labour market (internal and external) but, in the aggregate, as a "means of contributing to the competitiveness of the economy and protecting workers' jobs and conditions of employment" (Rainbird and Vincent,1996:141).

Changing role of training in trades union agendas Training has become a more central issue for trades unions since the mid-1980s than it had been in the preceding decades and many unions have attempted to incorporate training into their collective bargaining agenda, though with very limited success (Rainbird and Vincent, 1996). A number of factors have been identified by industrial relations analysts to account for unions' increased interest in training (see, for example, Rainbird, 1990; Keep and Rainbird, 1995; Rainbird and Vincent, 1996; Hyman, 1994). In England, the renewed concern with training as a collective bargaining and shop floor issue has been, in part, a function of the increasing marginalization (and ultimate exclusion) of trades unions from the development of vocational training and labour market policy under successive Conservative governments since 1979. At the same time, technological change, workplace reorganization (including job enlargement or 'multiskilling'), and continuing

waves of 'downsizing' and job shedding have made the issue of trade union input into the processes through which workers may lay claim to the jobs which remain (skills and qualifications) or prepare for newly created jobs (training or retraining) increasingly important.

In the context of economic downturn and the ideological dominance of neoliberalism, trades unions have become increasingly weakened over the past two decades. Massive job shedding in the relatively densely unionized manufacturing and public service sectors has resulted in significant shrinking of the unionized workforce. Declining union membership has been most pronounced in the United States, but it has also been significant in both England and Canada (Rothwell, 1993; Rainbird, 1990; McIlroy, 1988; Wells, 1987). Unions in all three countries have had greater difficulty in achieving quantitative demands at the bargaining table, traditionally the central goals of collective bargaining. These include, principally, financial benefits and hours of work. Bargaining strategy, in the face of continuing difficulties in achieving gains in these key areas, has tended to focus on what Hyman has termed the 'qualitative' bargaining agenda, which includes issues relating to the conditions of work and may include training and retraining (Hyman, 1994:125). Education and training services are viewed not only as a benefit to be gained for existing membership, but also as a strategy to increase union membership (Rainbird and Vincent, 1996). Of North America, Evans (1995) observes that education and career advancement are increasingly seen as key to union organizing strategies in an era when wage and financial benefits are unlikely to be substantially improved.

The shift towards the inclusion of training in collective bargaining was already a feature of the U.S. AFL-CIO's strategy in the early 1980s. The American labour federation held its first national conference on education and training in 1986, at which it called for "an adult education program on a scale and of a design never tried before" (quoted in BCEL, No. 13, October 1987:4). Member unions of the AFL-CIO, its President advised, would be going to the bargaining table, "to negotiate learning programmes and learning time, along with work time" (quoted in Sarmiento and Kay, 1990:7). In Canada, the Canadian Labour Congress and several of its affiliates in the provinces had adopted formal policies on training by 1989; major unions, including the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the Canadian Auto Workers, had successfully negotiated training items in their collective agreements (Jackson, 1992). And, in England, as Bonnerjea observed in a discussion on unions and workplace literacy programmes, there had been "a growing realization in all trades unions associated with Workbase that negotiations in the future must cover issues other than just pay; that training is a relatively easy way of winning 'something' for trades union members and that it is an area where employers' needs and trade union needs may at times coincide" (Bonnerjea, 1987:20).

It would appear that the appeal for trades unions of training as a negotiating item lies, in part, in the fact that it may allow them both to bargain 'constructively' with the employer (and to be seen to be contributing to productivity increases, for example) and to offer something to their members in the absence of more tangible material benefits. Increasingly, in the context of repeated waves of job shedding, unions have resorted to

bargaining for retraining or 'industrial adjustment' programmes for those who are made redundant (see, for example, Jackson, 1992).

Training has also been seen by some trades unions as a means of pursuing a 'more consensual approach' to industrial relations (Storey et al., 1993, cited in Rainbird, 1994:59). This has been particularly true of the more conservative private sector unions and, in the United States, it has been a defining feature of the majority of employer/union joint training initiatives. As Chapter 7 documents, this may be particularly true of workplace literacy and so-called 'basic skills' programmes, the majority of which appear to have been introduced in the context of workplace reorganization involving teams, multiskilling and 'quality' or 'continuous improvement' initiatives.[14]

Finally, the involvement of trades unions in the actual provision of training has become increasingly common on both sides of the Atlantic. This is consistent with a generalized move of the trades union movement from a representational to a servicing function. The trend indicates both a pragmatic response to a decreased capacity to represent workers and a more conservative vision of the role of trades unions in capitalist economies (Evans, 1995; McIlroy, 1988; Wells, 1987). The links between the servicing function of unions and a general openness to the notion of workplace literacy programming are clear. The AFL-CIO has seen a direct opportunity in worker literacy programming to increase its servicing function. This was explicitly stated in the federation's 1990 publication on workplace literacy: "A union-sponsored education

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[14] For a discussion of the differing responses of North American unions to such initiatives, as well as work restructuring in general, see Katz, 1988.

and training program that includes literacy ... can add significantly to the lineup of services you offer your members" (Sarmiento and Kay, 1990:11). Both the AFL-CIO in the United States and the Ontario Federation of Labour in Canada have, in fact, argued explicitly that the delivery of workplace literacy programmes is properly the function of unions; and both have argued against a role for public educational institutions in the delivery of such programmes (Sarmiento and Kay, 1990; Turk, 1989).

Trades unions and training for workers in unskilled jobs The majority of potential candidates for workplace literacy programmes—workers in unskilled jobs, workers with low formal qualifications and workers who do not speak the language of the workplace as their first language—are not members of unions (Rainbird, 1994; Rubery, 1995). This is particularly true of the United States, where union density is among the lowest in the western industrialized world and where, incidentally, the majority of workplace literacy activity has occurred.

Where unskilled workers are unionized, it has not been common practice for their unions to negotiate for either initial or recurrent training for them. In all workplaces, whether unionized or not, the majority of training opportunities are provided for skilled sections of the workforce (craft, technical and professional workers) and management staff (Canadian Labour and Productivity Centre, 1993; Rothwell, 1993). Prior to the business-initiated campaigns in the 1980s to make an issue of worker illiteracy and to institute literacy and basic skills programmes in workplaces, arguments for a more equal spread of training expenditures across workforce classifications were not commonly heard. The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) in England marked one exception with its initiation of the Workbase programme in a London

hospital in 1978. But Workbase had ceased to be a union initiative by 1983 and the independent agency's training activity remained confined to a very few workplaces in London throughout the 1980s. Although NUPE has continued its endorsement of Workbase's activities, significant workplace training for those in 'unskilled' job classifications continues to be the exception.

The massive labour shedding which has occurred in manufacturing sectors, resulting from both the relocation of manufacture to low-wage countries and increasing automation and technological innovation in the manufacturing industries, has tended to displace those in relatively unskilled work in the greatest numbers (Little; 1997; Rainbird, 1994). The general and continuing increase in formal educational and training qualifications of the workforce has further marginalized those with lower levels of formal qualification, as rising unemployment is accompanied by a filtering down process of better qualified workers. As Atkinson has noted, for example, because of this filtering-down process (in which "job seekers with skills, experience, age, health, etc. on their side displace those with fewer or no advantages"), there is a relatively high concentration of people with 'basic skills problems' among the unemployed generally and particularly among the long-term unemployed (1992:11). While the conventional estimate of adults with literacy problems in the British population is around 13 percent, Atkinson reports that Department of Education staff running (Restart) programmes for long-term unemployed in the early 1990s estimated that a quarter of their clients had "literacy problems" (ibid). Yet, as Rainbird has observed, though workers with a low level of qualification are "both vulnerable to unemployment because of the nature of the jobs they occupy and disadvantaged with respect to better

qualified job applicants when they compete for jobs", it is only recently that their particular vulnerability has been identified by trades unions (1994:55).

Trades Unions and Worker Illiteracy

Given the arguments which are generally used to support claims of worker illiteracy, the ways in which presumed illiterate workers are typically portrayed, and the generally acknowledged potential for punitive employer measures in response to suspected or demonstrated illiteracy, the participation of trades unions in supporting such claims is problematic. More than any other institutional participant in the campaigns, trades unions have direct experience of the 'deskilling' potential of automation and technological innovation (see, for example, Jackson, 1992). Trades unions also know that when industries relocate (whether regionally or globally), the search for a better educated or skilled workforce is rarely, if ever, the reason for such relocation. On the contrary, well educated and highly skilled workers—and the financial rewards and conditions of work which they expect and have frequently negotiated—are more likely to be what companies are escaping from. And, notwithstanding the 'new economy' discourse, trades union representatives are daily witness to the fact that the majority of workplaces continue to organize work in ways which allow workers little or no autonomy and which, all too frequently, make little or no use of workers' intellectual capacity[15] (see, for example, Sarmiento, 1991).

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[15] That the general level of education of the workforce has expanded more rapidly than industry's requirements for that education is well documented (See, for example, Berg, 1970; Rumberger, 1981, 1984; Myles and Fawcett, 1990). Underemployment (including underutilization of workers' capacity) is identified by Statistics Canada, for example, as a *contributor* to low literacy in adults (Statistics Canada et al., 1995).

Reasons for union support of workforce illiteracy diagnosis The recent concern of trades unions with training and retraining goes some way towards explaining unions' generally positive responses to the campaigns around low literate workers. Similarly, the broad labour endorsement of the high skills/high wages solution to declining competitiveness has supported a generalized promotion of any kind of workplace training initiative. In general, unions and union federations which represent workers with low levels of qualification have either implicitly or explicitly endorsed the positions put forward by the media campaigns: workplace basic skill deficits present problems for the individual, the employer and the nation, problems which can best be addressed through specially targeted basic skills programmes. The extent to which trades union leadership and shop floor representatives believe this to be so is difficult to assess. There is evidence, however, that in many cases unions are adopting the opportunistic position which many professional educationalists have done with respect to the issue: if governments and business interests are arguing that a section of the workforce is underskilled, then this can only support unions' training objectives whether in collective bargaining or in broader 'human resource' policy development. As expressed by the AFL-CIO, for example, "The heightened public interest in workplace literacy gives a special timeliness to unions's initiatives in worker education. So does the widespread national concern about maintaining a skilled and competitive workforce in a changing economy" (Sarmiento and Kay, 1990:14).

Trades unions' roles in workplace literacy promotion and provision In some cases, labour has been more tentative in its endorsement of the issue than others, although this varies considerably from the union leadership to the shop floor. In England, for

example, while NUPE (and, more recently, UNISON) leadership has endorsed the activities of Workbase in the context of equal opportunities for women and minorities, and increased access to training for the least skilled, there has not been a strong focus on the issue as a workforce deficit. It would appear, however, that the promotion of Workbase's programmes to employers focuses more on the problems which low literate employees may cause. It might be assumed that shop floor union representatives go along with the 'pitch' to employers for pragmatic reasons. The research conducted for this study has produced evidence that, certainly in the private sector, union representatives have tended to participate in the 'selling' of the workplace literacy programme to employers.[16]

Similarly, in the United States, the official position of the AFL-CIO (as contained, for example, in its 'union guide' to workplace literacy) is that the popular media have misrepresented the worker literacy problem; the document argues for a more nuanced view of the issue and points to both employer and public policy on training as the source of any 'skills gap' which may exist (Sarmiento and Kay, 1990:17-18). The promotion of workplace literacy and basic skills programmes by member unions frequently conflicts with this stance, however, and is more likely to support the media presentation. The United Auto Workers, for example, co-sponsored with General Motors, a cross-country tour by a long-time General Motors employee (and UAW member) who had, after years of keeping his literacy "dysfunction" from both his

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[16] In the case of the best documented (and most celebrated) of all workplace literacy programmes in England—that at Baxi Heating in Preston, Lancashire—the Joint Shop Stewards committee (representing the Manufacturing, Scientific and Financial Workers Union and the Amalgamated Engineering Union) played *the* central role, in persuading, first, management and, then, their own members to support the programme. They were also instrumental, in the early days of the programme, in overcoming member resistance to the idea of participating in such a programme (See Bootle and Rowley, 1992).

employer and his co-workers, recently enroled in the joint company-union educational programme. His tour featured the 'testimonial' typical of adult literacy campaigning—his was entitled 'Literacy: From the Closet to the Campus' and was delivered to various audiences, including business luncheons, across the country. He had also been appointed (by the UAW and General Motors) as "one of the key persons to address the educational needs of the UAW and General Motors workers" (Castor, 1991:29).

In both Canada and the United States, trades unions which have become involved in the workforce literacy campaigns have tended to adopt positions which are more closely related to the evangelical tone of literacy campaigns than to conventional union approaches to training or any other negotiated benefits. The AFL-CIO, for example, situates its discussion of workforce illiteracy in terms of America's ongoing 'war' on illiteracy. The federation's publication, *Worker-Centred Learning: A Union Guide to Workplace Literacy* cites a 1918 Convention Resolution of the American Federation of Labor: "Organized labor has always been the avowed enemy of illiteracy" (Sarmiento and Kay, 1990: 28). A 1989 Convention Resolution stated: "Labor welcomes the national interest in workplace literacy which supports unions' longtime advocacy of basic skills training ..." (ibid). As the example of the General Motors employee/UAW member described above indicates, member unions of the AFL-CIO also engaged in the proselytizing which typifies literacy campaigning. That particular worker had, in fact, been honoured at the White House as the ninth of President Bush's 'Thousand Points of Light' (Castor, 1991).

Many Canadian unions have adopted a similarly enthusiastic stance towards the workforce literacy campaigns. Both the Canadian Labour Congress and the breakaway

conservative Canadian Federation of Labour have received federal government funding to initiate literacy programmes. At least four member federations of the Canadian Labour Congress have become active and vocal participants in the workforce literacy campaigns as well as providers of workplace literacy programmes. As discussed above, one of these federations, the Ontario Federation of Labour, equates its workplace literacy programmes with Third World 'popular education' programmes. Its fellow federation in the province of New Brunswick, on the other hand, has represented the issue in terms which support the worst uses of the workforce literacy campaign by employer groups. They cite uncritically the 'evidence' on the costs of illiteracy to both businesses and society in general.[17]

CONCLUSION

The workforce literacy campaigns embody many contradictions. At the broadest level, the public debate about workforce literacy levels is taking place at a time when there is increasing evidence that the supply exceeds the demand for well educated and trained workers and when expectations of pay and benefits in line with educational attainment are increasingly being frustrated. As well, the literacy levels of the least formally educated sections of the workforce have been specifically targeted as national

[17] The New Brunswick Federation of Labour's policy statement on illiteracy, entitled 'Illiteracy: A Cancer that Gnaws at the Very Fabric of our Society', claimed "It is unrealistic to believe that illiteracy in the general population is not reflected in the labour force". It went on to quote, without editorial comment, the "estimated costs in dollar terms to the Canadian Business Community per year" from the Laubach Industrial Tutoring Project: lost productivity - 2.5 billion; industrial accidents - 1.6 billion; upgrading training - 1.0 billion; remedial skills training - 5.0 million. It also cited a list of "incalculable costs to society" which include "unnecessary UIC payments, inflated prices to cover mistakes, extra medical and worker compensation charges, tuition fees lost by illiterate students, dwindling revenues for publishers, subsidies for industry retraining, wages lower by illiteracy, jail for frustrated illiterates, lost taxes, reduced international competitiveness, and blighted, unhappy lives for millions ... " (New Brunswick Federation of Labour, undated: 15.5-15.6).

problems even as the limited opportunities for further education and training which these sections of the workforce may have had access to have been systematically reduced.[18] Indeed, the diagnosis of a drastically deficient section of the workforce has coincided with the widespread displacement of those very workers, both directly by capital flight and workforce restructuring resulting from technological change and increased automation and, indirectly, by the filtering down process (of better qualified workers) which accompanies rising unemployment.

In spite of the manifest contradictions and specious claims—in spite of the discrepancies between people's lived experience and the 'evidence' of the workforce literacy campaigns—the campaigns have, nevertheless, achieved a significant degree of credibility. That illiteracy poses a threat to individual enterprises and the national economy, and that it is in many cases lack of literacy skills (or educational qualification, generally) rather than lack of jobs which accounts for unemployment, have become conventional wisdom in the last decade. The proliferation of 'training' (and, increasingly, basic education) programmes targeted at the unemployed, the acceptance that those in receipt of income support from the state should be obliged to participate in education and training programmes, the increase in 'industrial adjustment' programmes for workers displaced by restructured or relocated industries—all of these are premised to varying degrees on an acceptance that, with additional education or

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[18] Apprenticeship programmes, for example, have been reduced significantly in England (Rainbird, 1990) and their continued 'relevance' is being reviewed in Canada (see, for example, Economic Council of Canada, 1992). In some cases, educational upgrading programmes for the unemployed have been reduced or eliminated—for example the Basic Training for Skill Development Program in Canada (Thomas, 1983). The trend, in general, has been to replace rigorous training programmes with employer-centred, informal programmes including Youth Training and Employment Training in England, Canadian Jobs Strategy (CJS) programmes in Canada and Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) programmes in the U.S.

training, workers are less likely to lose their jobs and, in the event that they do, will be more likely to find other work.

It has been argued in this chapter that the campaigns to create a public issue of illiteracy among workers have gained credibility in the context of the broader ideological frameworks of the 'new economy' discourse and the renewed human capital focus of education, and in the material contexts of economic downturn and industrial restructuring. Many adult educationalists and trades unionists have accepted—even embraced—the 'fact' of widespread worker illiteracy and even those who have not endorsed the issue have generally failed to counter the claims.

This chapter has argued that the general endorsement of such a highly debatable 'problem' reflects aspects of the current position of both adult educationalists and organized labour, rather than a considered and principled stand. The full implications of that endorsement will become clearer in the light of the discussion in the next chapter. That discussion will focus more closely on the actual claims which have been made in respect of workers' literacy competencies and the 'evidence' which has been used to support those claims. What both educationalists and trades unionists have endorsed, it is argued, is a generalized and basically unfounded problematizing of workers which has tended to scapegoat sections of workforces—in particular, women and ethnic minority workers and those in low paid work in general.

Chapter 5

The Workforce Illiteracy Problem in Perspective
A Critical Evaluation of the Evidence

INTRODUCTION

As the preceding chapter discussed, the idea that workers in advanced industrial economies, where education has long been a determinant of employee selection and promotion, may lack essential literacy skills has gained legitimacy from the arguments of 'new economy' theorists and educational reformers. The 'new economy' discourse supports the idea of a 'new literacy', a new frontier in human social and intellectual development; it has, thus, lent credence to claims of increasing worker illiteracy at a time when the general educational attainment of workers has reached unprecedented levels. The conservative critique of education supports the idea that schooled literacy is a 'dysfunctional' literacy and educational attainment cannot, therefore, be viewed as a predictor of 'functional' competencies.

The reinvention of 'literacy' However, though they have sought and gained credence from these wider contexts, both the campaigns to establish the 'fact' of worker illiteracy and the programmes which have been developed to address the putative problem are essentially grounded neither in the theory of a 'new economy' nor in the notion of a developed but 'dysfunctional' literacy. On the contrary, the primary basis for current claims of worker illiteracy has been the reinvention of 'literacy' in the fundamental sense of the ability to meet the reading and writing demands of everyday life and relatively less skilled work. This has entailed the

establishment of both a new definition of fundamental 'literacy' and a new standard against which individuals may be judged to be either literate or illiterate.

In North America, the diffusion (and wide acceptance) of a new standard of literacy has been effected through the application of tests which measure the performance of the adult population in general, and specific demographic categories in particular, against this new standard. In England, the process through which the literacy competencies of workers have been problematized has entailed a more specific focus on workers in less skilled work and has been primarily demonstrated through the application of standard 'basic skills' assessments across a range of grades and classifications of workers in particular workplaces. The net effect of the two strategies has not been dissimilar, however. Both have resulted not in a questioning of the capacity or suitability of workers in general but in a specific targeting of particular sections of the working class—workers with less formal qualification in general, but principally immigrants, native-born ethnic minorities, and women.

The discussion, thus far, has suggested that the claims for a crisis of worker illiteracy are, for the most part, purely speculative. The preceding chapter challenged some of the core assumptions which underlie such claims—including the 'upskilling' thesis and the theory of a 'new economy'. This chapter presents the principal claims of the workforce illiteracy argument, as they relate specifically to workers in less skilled work, and provides a more systematic critique of each of these claims in turn. The objective of the chapter is to examine critically the evidence on which claims of widespread worker illiteracy are based.

The chapter begins with an examination and assessment of the claims which have been made about the so-called 'literacy competencies' of workers. These claims generally fall into two categories—the anecdotal representation of the 'illiterate' worker, on the one hand, and the empirical evidence of the extent of the problem, on the other. The empirical evidence includes employer surveys and direct workplace assessments of workers as well as literacy assessments of the general population or targeted sample populations.

From the examination of the claims about *workers*, the discussion moves to an examination and assessment of the claims which have been made about the literacy (and education) requirements of *work*. The final two sections of the chapter present the alleged crisis of worker literacy as a code for the generalized problematizing of working class attitudes and the specific problematizing of ethnicity and gender.

The Workforce 'Illiteracy' Problem in Perspective: Assessing the Claims

There are many versions of the putative worker 'illiteracy' problem, each of which will be discussed in some detail in this chapter. In one version, the problem is that of outright illiteracy—workers unable to read or understand instructions either for their labour processes or for compliance with health and safety regulations and measures. In another version, the problem is defined in terms of the persistence of high levels of 'functional illiteracy' in both the general population and the working population. In another version, the problem is presented as the unavoidable outcome of impending demographic change and the projected infiltra-

tion of the workplace by previously bypassed (and largely illiterate) population cohorts. And, in yet another version, the problem is a function of across-the-board increases in job literacy requirements arising out of the presumed revolutionizing of the labour process in the 'new economy' and the relative growth of employment in highly skilled occupations. Popular discourse on the subject has tended to draw on all of these separate versions of the problem in varying permutations.

PORTRAYING ILLITERATE WORKERS: INVOKING THE IMAGE OF THE 'PRIMITIVE'

As previously noted, many of the claims about worker illiteracy are framed in terms of a 'new literacy'. Workers, the majority of reports either state or imply, can no longer function with the reading and writing competencies which were adequate even a decade ago. Workplace literacy programmes claim to 'empower' workers not only to work faster and better but to participate more fully in the transformed workplace; they claim to prepare workers for high technology jobs in the new economy (see, for example, Stein, undated; Taw, 1990; Sticht,1992, 1996). But when 'illiterate' workers are described, the distance between the workers portrayed and the promise of programmes is self-evidently unbridgeable. Typically, the portrayal of illiterate workers refers not to the absence of any particular skill or set of skills, but to the mythology of literacy—that all-embracing skill which distinguishes the civilized from the uncivilized, the modern from the primitive.

The images which dominate both popular and official presentations of the worker illiteracy issue draw on a century-long legacy of pathologizing and stereotyping of the 'illiterate'. 'Illiterate' workers are commonly represented as profoundly simple, wholly ignorant of either the conventions or the main organizing

features of modern society. Like Dr. Jarvis' nineteenth century uneducated worker (cited in Chapter 2) who was less able to wield a shovel than the educated worker, or Wrong's (1945) early twentieth century African colonials who, unable to read warning notices and safety regulations, were killed at railway crossings and injured by machinery, the 'illiterates' of the modern workplace are fundamentally *simple*.

Anecdotal representations of the problem In one account of the problem, for example, *Canadian Business* magazine introduced an article on the issue of workforce illiteracy with an anecdote related by the representative of a literacy organization who, one might presume from the context, was trying to sell the idea of workplace literacy to an employer engaged in woodcutting (Ritts, 1986:54). On a visit to a lumber camp, the literacy representative had reportedly noticed that "a large number of workers were wearing bandages". He was informed (in confidence) by the (embarrassed) foreman that the injuries had "coincided with the company's new safety campaign". The foreman explained that management had been "puzzled" until they realized that the workers had been "imitating the illustrations on the safety posters; they had been unable to read the messages printed underneath telling them *not* to do the things shown" (emphasis in original). The infantilization of workers implicit in this anecdote is reflected in the title of the article, "What if Johnny still can't read?".[1] And, although the article later quotes an educator asserting that, contrary to the popular perception of illiterates as stupid,

[1] The reference is to the continuing debate in North America about the teaching of reading in primary schools. The original source of the reference is the 1955 publication by Robert Flesch, *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do About It.*

"we are dealing with sharp people", it is difficult to imagine any reader being convinced.

The anecdote is presented as direct evidence of the existence (and, one must assume, the nature) of worker illiteracy. The actual nature of the accidents is not described; neither does the article raise the issue of the company's possible culpability. The image borders on the comic—and, indeed, the situation described is preposterous, at least on the surface. Yet, on a deeper reading, it is possible to imagine a situation in which this could happen, not because of worker illiteracy or stupidity but, much more plausibly, because the employer had installed new machinery without providing training on its safe operation. If this initial negligence were combined with (evidently) disastrously designed safety posters, injury might result even among the best educated workers.

Another Canadian example, contained in an Ontario government publication on literacy and the economy, illustrates the problem of worker illiteracy with an even more incredible anecdote (Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, undated:9). A delivery truck driver who had since enroled in a literacy programme is quoted, describing the difficulties which illiteracy presented for him in his work. He says that, although he couldn't read street signs he, nevertheless, "got around alright. Bay Street—I knew it started with a B and Wellington with a W. That's how I got around." (There must surely be hundreds of streets in his city beginning with the letters b and w, but we'll suspend that question for now.) One day, as he tells it, he set off in the wrong direction on the expressway and ended up in another city which, incidentally, is about 40 miles distant from his origination. The other city,

coincidentally, also had a Bay Street and when he recognized the street name, he assumed he was in his home city. He also located a post office on this Bay Street (which he recognized because of the initial p), and on the assumption it was his home city destination, deposited his load of first-class mail. When his mistake was discovered (by others) on his return, he had to drive back to the other city and retrieve the mail. Although the surrounding text identifies the driver's problem as an inability to read and write, there is obviously a much more profound problem of intellectual capacity or psychological health, if this anecdote is to be taken as true. Apart from the fact that the first city is several times the size of the second, how is it possible to drive on the expressway for an hour and assume you end up in the city from which you started, and then to make the return journey without realizing that you had been away? And, are we really to believe that Bay Street, Toronto—one of Canada's richest and best known streets—is identified by a native of that city only by its initial letter and that a street with the same name in any other city might be confused with it? The most likely explanation is that the story became entirely garbled—both in the man's relating it and in its transcription. What is significant here, however, is that it was used as an official representation of the problem of worker illiteracy in a government document.

Fundamental conception of illiteracy unchanged Though manifestly bizarre, the preceding anecdotes are not especially peculiar in the public discourse on workforce illiteracy. On the contrary, as their appearance in a mainstream business publication and an official government policy document indicates, they are generally accepted representations of the putative 'problem'. What they illustrate most

distinctly is that—notwithstanding the rhetoric that 'illiteracy' in the late twentieth century is not the same as illiteracy a century ago but refers to a new, more advanced standard of 'literate' competencies—little has, in fact, changed in terms of popular perceptions of the 'illiterate'. The designation of a person as 'illiterate' in 1997 signifies exactly the same assessment of that person's nature and ability as it did a century ago.[2] The fundamental assumption remains that adults who have difficulties reading and writing also lack many of the attributes of normal human intellectual functioning, including judgement and common sense and even spatial orientation.

In some cases, portrayals are frankly patronizing—as, for example, was England's *Observer* newspaper's description of Duncan, a manual worker participating in a workplace basic skills programme at a Preston heating company (Williams, 1990). Duncan, the article claimed, was "a polite, sleepy lad, the sort sent out to do the gardening during difficult lessons". In other cases, illiterate workers are portrayed as alien. A 1988 *Time* magazine article on workforce illiteracy, for example, visually portrayed supposed illiterate workers as blank—literally without eyes (Gorman 1988:56). The graphic accompanying the article depicts a row of five male workers wearing hard hats and overalls. The men have no eyes. A sixth man, a professional wearing glasses and a suit, is

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[2] The American Bar Association's (1987) publication on literacy asks readers to "Imagine what it would be like to have to remember a long list of phone numbers or an entire grocery list—to have to clutter one's mind with the commonplace. This is what illiterates—the unlettered—have to do every day. They have to memorize, to remember, to go through life by rote. They have to commit to memory all of those common things that the rest of us take for granted because we can read. And illiterates must do this day after day. They are more than dependent upon the spoken word—they are its prisoners. ... To be an illiterate adult is a crippling disability, forcing the unlettered to rely on their senses and to live forever in the present" (American Bar Association Task Force on Literacy, 1987:1-2).

carefully drawing letters in place of the eyes of the blue-collar workers. He has drawn A and B on the first man, C and D on the second, and is in the process of drawing the E and F on the third man. Beneath the drawing, under the article's title, 'The Literacy Gap', is the subheading, "To close it—and to open the eyes of millions of workers—U.S. companies are spending hundreds of millions every year as educators of last resort".

Simple but not innocent: representations of threat The one skill regularly attributed to the so-called illiterates—more often than not, as evidence of their 'sharpness'—is their ability to fool others into thinking they are 'normal', that they are able to read and write. As the above-cited *Observer* article expressed it, for example: "People with reading and writing difficulties are notoriously adept at hiding them" (Williams, 1990). Subterfuge is, of course, not normally esteemed, except perhaps when we are admiring an atypical or unexpected display of intelligence—from a small child or a pet, for example. And, indeed, there is an undercurrent of threat in many of the presentations of illiterates' alleged ability (and propensity) to mask their problem. Kozol has expressed this threat most dramatically in his popular polemic, *Illiterate America*: "[The] masking skills [of the illiterate] in time will yield to a determined passion to remove those masks and to compel us to look hard into the face of every Caliban we have created and ignored. Violent disorders will become endemic" (1985:194-5). Less fantastical, but hardly less exaggerated, is the presentation of the threat in several U.S. business journals. An article on the workforce illiteracy problem in the U.S. *Training* magazine typifies the aggressive and distinctly paranoid tone of many such presentations:

"John and Jane can't read, can't write, can't spell. They can't add, either—or subtract or multiply or divide. And right this minute they are down in personnel, applying for jobs with your company. Know what? They'll be hired, too. And you'll get tagged to train them" (Zemke, 1989:33).

A more likely scenario than Kozol's endemic violent disorder is that employers will translate the assumption of duplicity into more rigorous screening procedures. A 1989 article in the U.S. *Management World* magazine clearly anticipates this: "The near abandonment of pre-employment testing [because they had been found by the courts to be discriminatory (S.H.)] has increased the difficulty of identifying prospective employees who have inadequate basic skills. ... The hiring is further complicated by the innate intelligence of illiterates. Most are not dumb and have developed all kinds of clever ploys to hide their inabilities, such as not having their glasses, memory lapses and being unable to fill out an employment form because of a sprained wrist" (Goddard, 1989:9).

FROM PORTRAYING TO QUANTIFYING: THE 'EMPIRICAL' EVIDENCE FOR WORKER ILLITERACY

Like the theory of a 'new economy' and the related 'upskilling' imperative, claims of widespread (and profound) illiteracy among the workforces of industrialized countries have generally not required substantiation. Bland assertion and anecdotal evidence are typically sufficient to make the case. Indeed, many of the assessments of the poor literacy skills of workers—in North America in particular—draw primarily on the assumption of a general failure of schools to prepare students adequately for work (see, for example, Mikulecky, 1981). There is,

however, a growing body of evidence which purports to substantiate the hitherto impressionistic diagnoses of pervasive worker illiteracy.

Two sources of evidence for the existence of worker illiteracy The 'empirical' evidence for worker illiteracy in both North America and England has been derived principally from two sources—the supposed condition of literacy in the general population, on the one hand, and data from direct workplace assessments and employer surveys, on the other. In North America, so-called 'literacy' surveys have entirely eclipsed educational attainment data as a source of information about the condition of adult literacy development over the past decade. The surveys have purported to show that illiteracy is widespread among the adult populations in both Canada and the United States. In England, significant adult illiteracy has been extrapolated from the self-reports of a single sample population, participants in the National Child Development Study (Simonite, 1983; Hamilton and Stasinopoulos, 1987). While the North American literacy surveys have specifically interrogated the occupational/literacy relationship, a majority of claims which cite the literacy surveys to confirm the extent of illiteracy in the workforce simply assume that the purported levels of illiteracy in the general population are *mirrored* in the workforce (see, for example, DesLauriers, 1990). In England, this assumption has been the primary source of evidence for worker illiteracy.

The second general body of evidence used on both sides of the Atlantic claims to furnish a more direct measure of both the extent and the consequences of worker illiteracy than the general data on popular literacy can provide. It is comprised principally of workplace literacy 'audits' which purport to measure the amount of

reading and writing workers are required to do, assessments (both general and specific) of worker literacy competencies at their workplaces, and surveys of employers which purport both to confirm the existence of worker illiteracy and to document its costs to the firm(s).

Quantifying adult illiteracy in England As previously discussed, the generalized and continuing problematizing of adult literacy is, to a great extent, an American phenomenon, though any distinction between the United States and Canada has become much less clear in the most recent period of literacy campaigning. The organization of public education in England has not provided a readily transparent basis for the extrapolation of literacy competency such as is provided by grade attainment in both Canada and the United States, for example. In addition, the early establishment of separate and quite distinct educational 'paths' in England, based on the assumption of differing innate capacities, has meant that a wide range of attainment is not only tolerated but expected and planned for[3] (see, Simon, 1991; Green, 1991a). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that there has been less preoccupation in that country, than in either the United States or Canada, with measuring the state of development of adult literacy in a comprehensive fashion.

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[3] The expansion of secondary education in England in the 1940s did not end the division of education into distinct and unequal paths, until then characterizedby the elementary/secondaryschooling division. Rather, it entrenched a 'tri-partite' system of grammar schools, secondary modern schools and, to a lesser extent, technical schools. The educational 'path' a child took was based on his or her achievement as assessed by 'intelligence' testing at the age of 11. In spite of moves towards a more comprehensive and inclusive system of education from the late 1960s, selectivity remains a central feature of the English educational system and the majority of students are still not expected to attain the terminal school qualification, A Levels. (For a critique of the 'Eleven Plus' intelligence testing, see Simon, 1971.)

Estimates of adult illiteracy in the early 1970s, in the context of the short-lived national adult literacy campaign, were self-admittedly "educated guesswork".[4] The main attempt in the intervening period to arrive at a more empirically based measure was an analysis of the 1981 interviewing sweep of the National Child Development Study, a longitudinal survey of all people born in one week in 1958 in England, Scotland and Wales. Drawing on the answers of this sample of (then) 23 year olds to questions about their reading, writing, spelling and mathematics competencies, it has been estimated that about 13 percent had some degree of difficulty with one or more of these competencies (Simonite, 1983; Hamilton and Stasinopoulos, 1987). The National Child Development Study analysis has provided the basis for the extrapolation of a national adult illiteracy rate of thirteen percent, although a significant proportion (26 percent) reported difficulties only with mathematics. A more recent survey of 21-year-olds in further education colleges, carried out by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, estimated that around 15 percent had literacy difficulties and 20 percent had difficulties with mathematics (Dearing, 1993, cited in National Commission on Education, 1993:5). More closely akin to American 'functional literacy' tests was a Mori Poll conducted in 1987 (Training Agency and ALBSU, undated). However, although it supposedly discovered that 44 percent of the survey sample could not understand a fire notice and 26 percent had difficulty filling in a form, it has received little

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[4] The campaign estimate of 6 percent adult illiteracy was based, in part, on a direct (and arbitrarily favourable) extrapolation from contemporary estimates of illiteracy rates in the United States. The process was described as "educated guesswork" by the organization which arrived at the estimate, the British Association of Settlements (BAS, 1974:5).

attention in either the general discourse on adult literacy or the promotion of workplace literacy.

Defining and measuring adult illiteracy in North America In North America, by contrast, the definition and measurement of literacy has been a continuing preoccupation over the past two decades. Since 1971, at least nine national literacy surveys have been conducted in the United States[5] (three since 1990) and, since 1987, three have been conducted in Canada. Each of this succession of surveys has adopted a standard of literacy—either wholly new or a variant on a previous test—against which respondents are measured.

The first such test to gain media attention—and to provoke "general cries of alarm"—was the Adult Performance Level (APL) survey, funded by the U.S. Department of Education and developed at the University of Texas from 1971 to 1975 (Hunter and Harman, 1979:29). Though since superseded, it merits some attention both because it remained the primary basis for claims of widespread adult illiteracy in the United States throughout the entire 1980s decade and because it so transparently demonstrates the socially constructed nature of late twentieth century 'illiteracy'. The developers of the APL adopted as their standard of literacy the knowledge and skills which 'successful' middle class Americans (as measured by educational attainment, income, and occupational status) were assumed to be proficient in; they then tested samples of the adult population against this standard. Several analysts have pointed to the circularity of the definition of literacy or

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[5] For a description and discussion of the literacy surveys carried out in the United States from the early 1970s through the early 1980s, see Stedman and Kaestle (1991:94-111).

'functional competency' utilized by the APL (see, for example, Cervero, 1980; Kazemek, 1985). As Kazemek has noted, "After deciding ... that a wealthy lawyer is more functionally competent than a poor day-laborer, the APL authors selected some characteristics of each, assumed those were the causes of the differences between the lawyer and the day-laborer, and then established those characteristics as the criteria for success and functional competency" (1985:25). Inevitably, the APL survey found that nearly one-third of the tested population had difficulties with some of the 'functional' tasks which it was assumed successful middle class individuals could and did perform—for example filling out tax forms and reading rental leases and insurance policies. In spite of the wholly dubious basis for the APL's definition of the standard of functional competency, the survey was nevertheless generally accepted as the most comprehensive and reliable picture of the state of literacy in America to that time (Kozol, 1985; Hunter and Harman, 1979). The results were generalized to the adult population and provided the basis for a decade of claims by literacy campaigners and educational reformers.

The main adult 'functional literacy' tests which have followed the APL, in both Canada and the United States, have all been based on one model, the test used for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—a congressionally mandated longitudinal sampling of educational achievement by students in the United States. The NAEP test was developed by the private testing agency, the Educational Testing Service, under contract to the U.S. Department of Education. Southam Press's (1987) and Statistics Canada's (1989) surveys of the Canadian adult population, the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) 1992 survey of selected

unemployed adults, the U.S. Department of Education's 1993 general adult population survey, and the series of surveys organized by Canada and the OECD in 1994 are all slight modifications of the NAEP, utilizing a virtually identical range of 'literacy' tasks.[6] Each of the succession of surveys has subjected samples of the adult populations (and, in the case of the DOL survey, a subset of out-of-work adults) to a test of reading, writing and mathematics which claims to reflect the 'real life' literacy demands of the late twentieth century. The implementation of each survey has altered the scoring system and criteria for classification of respondents in some way and, although only one (the Canadian Southam survey) used the terminology 'illiterate' and 'functionally illiterate', every one of the surveys has supported such an interpretation—those scoring in the lowest or the two lowest categories have been deemed to lack the literacy skills for effective functioning in modern work and society.

Assessing the North American surveys as tests of 'literacy' The NAEP-based surveys have all purported to measure the 'literacy' competencies of the adult populations; and the fact that a proportion of respondents has performed at (or below) the lowest level(s) on the surveys has, in each case, supported claims of widespread 'illiteracy'—typically conceived of, as in the illiterate worker charac-

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[6] The first general literacy surveys based on the NAEP were, in fact, conducted in Canada. Southam Press conducted the first in 1987; this was followed in 1989 by the Statistics Canada survey, *Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities*. In the United States, the first survey based on the NAEP to be applied to an adult population was *Profiling the Literacy Proficiencies of JTPA and ES/UI Populations*, applied to Job Training Partnership Act clients and Employment Service/Unemployment Insurance clients. The first application of the test to the general population was the 1992 *National Adult Literacy Survey* (NALS). In 1994 Statistics Canada initiated the *International Adult Literacy Survey* which was conducted in seven member countries of the OECD - Canada, the United States, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Netherlands, and Switzerland.

terizations above, as a complete inability to read and write. The surveys themselves have not supported any such conclusion, however, and the majority of survey reports have acknowledged that the level of skill measured is of an entirely different order than that which is typically taken as literacy. The report on the 1986 NAEP survey of young American adults, for example, characterized the general performance on the survey as "impressive". Is it reasonable, the preface asks, "to declare people who can perform such a wide variety of literacy tasks 'illiterate' or 'functionally illiterate'"? (Thomas Sticht in Kirsch and Jungeblut, 1986:vi).

The range of exercises has been virtually identical in all of the NAEP-based surveys and the skills required simply to decode the passages are, in fact, relatively high—even at the lowest levels of difficulty. At the 'easiest' level, for example, exercises have included an Associated Press syndicated newspaper item. Yet respondents able to complete such an exercise but unable to complete exercises consistently (defined as 80 percent accuracy) *beyond* this level would be considered 'functionally illiterate'. Exercises at the second level (which is generally assessed as marginally literate) have included identifying the theme of a short poem; at the third level, respondents have been required to synthesize the arguments from a newspaper editorial; and at the highest level(s) respondents have, in some cases, been required to bring specialized knowledge to the exercises. Indeed, at all levels, respondents must possess specialized knowledge—of the conventions of graphs, charts, and maps, for example—in order to successfully complete the 'document literacy' sections.

The surveys justify their use of quite complex material at all performance levels on the basis of what respondents are required to do with the material. In the most recent, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), for example, the "easiest (prose literacy) task" asked respondents to determine the "maximum number of days" they should take a medicine—from reading a "medicine label" whose length and complexity are, in fact, more characteristic of medical texts than the labels on either over-the-counter or prescription medicines (Statistics Canada, et al., 1996:88-89). The theory is that, although the medicine label is quite complex and the vocabulary highly technical, it contains only one reference to number of days (under the heading "dosage") and "functional" readers should be able to use the "organizational aids" (paragraphs, headings, italics, and the like) to scan for the specified information even if the vocabulary is generally beyond their comprehension (ibid).

The easiest 'document literacy' task in this same test asked respondents to examine a pictorial chart representing the percentage of women teachers in ten European countries and to identify the percentage of Greek teachers who are women (ibid:96). The graph is headed "Few Dutch Women at the Blackboard" and the text above the chart begins with a statement about the percentage of women teachers in the Netherlands. There is no textual reference to any other country but the Netherlands. The text and the heading are referred to in the discussion of this item as "distracting information", and the exercise was designed explicitly to test whether respondents would be 'distracted' by it.

Both of these items were classed as Level 1 tasks in terms of difficulty. IALS respondents who were able to perform Level 1 tasks with 80 percent accuracy, but were unable to perform with 80 percent accuracy at the next level of difficulty (Level 2), were deemed to be functioning at Level 1. This means that, in spite of being able to extract the necessary information from an uncharacteristically complex medicine label and the correct answer from a deliberately confusing chart, a person might still be classified as 'functionally illiterate'.

Assessing the North American literacy surveys as tests of ability to 'function'

The report on the most recent Canadian 'literacy' survey (1994) acknowledges that what is being measured by the surveys is not what would normally be thought of as 'literacy' but, in fact, a relatively high order of textual competency (Statistics Canada et al., 1996:14). The relevance of the tests as measures of literacy is, nevertheless, asserted on the grounds that they reflect the actual literacy competencies required of everyday life and work. As the report notes, the IALS survey "..does not challenge the reality that most adults can in fact read, but it does question whether they can read well enough to get the correct answers on test items that represent the range of difficulty found in tasks that they encounter in their daily lives. The ability to carefully and critically read printed materials while looking for key pieces of information is a highly prized workplace skill, and the IALS calls into question the very meaning of a 'literate adult' in modern society" (ibid). Yet the extent to which the NAEP-based surveys actually test adults' ability to perform 'real life' tasks is very much a matter of contention (see, for example, Heap, 1990). Quite obviously, neither identifying the theme of a poem nor

synthesizing the arguments of a newspaper editorial constitute typical tasks for the majority. And, though illustrations, charts and graphs may frequently be less than perfectly designed, it is difficult to imagine a real life situation in which they would be deliberately constructed to confuse. Even where the exercises are, on the face of it, more typical of everyday uses of literacy, as Heap observes, they still present 'closed systems' typically characteristic of school-based tests.[7] And adults, he notes, are typically presented not with closed systems where their only task is to choose a correct answer but with open systems where a series of choices and decisions have to be made and where "it is an open empirical question as to whether literate means will be the most rational ones available to participants" (1990:39-40). The problem with definitions of functional literacy, he notes, is that "they assume reading and writing are the most rational means in *any* circumstances where written language can be used for effective functioning" (ibid).

Limitations on validity of survey findings The recent North American literacy surveys have been analyzed here at some length in order to demonstrate the serious limitations of these so-called 'innovations' in the measurement of adult literacy—innovations which claim to provide a more accurate picture of the state of literacy skill development than educational attainment data can, for example. Clearly, such tests can make no greater claim to measure a person's ability to use

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[7] He analyses a test item based on making a warranty claim for a defective radio, an item which also appeared in the 1992 U.S. National Adult Literacy Survey. The survey scenario presents respondents with one set of choices. They are put in the place of the company repair person and asked to examine four notes which have been returned with defective radios. Their task is to select from the four notes the one which most closely conforms to the instructions provided with the warranty by the company. As Heap notes, in "real life", repair persons are not expected to "circle a letter or evaluate how specific a note is"; in such situations they may read a single note (or talk to the consumer) and examine and repair an appliance (1990:43).

literacy in daily life than can any school-based test. For, as the above examples illustrate, they are in no fundamental way different from school-based tests—except that, among the population tested, there are many who may be much less prepared for the format and the conventions of the test than would be the case among school-based (or more recently schooled) populations.

In spite of their claim to be tests of 'real life' functioning, the recent North American literacy surveys have, of course, not attempted to monitor the actual performance of adults as they have gone about their daily lives, including their work lives. On the contrary, all respondents—regardless of their background or circumstances—have been subjected to one arbitrarily selected set of tasks constructed and presented as a test. And, though they have claimed to be presented in a "neutral and non-threatening" manner,[8] it is clear that the extent to which the presence of an interviewer administering a test in a person's home is 'neutral and non-threatening' is dependent on many factors apart from the manner of presentation. An eighty year old pensioner might be expected to react quite differently to the situation than a seventeen year old who is still in school or a twenty-five year old university graduate student. A woman whose first language is Portuguese and who works at home might be expected to react quite differently from an English speaking professional. A person who had left school without successfully completing might be expected to take quite a different view of any testing situation than one who had experienced only educational success. In all cases, the degree to which the test exercises resembled things which a person did regularly (or had done

[8] Statistics Canada et al., 1996:15.

recently) would affect the level of confidence with which they might tackle an exercise in the test situation. And, crucially, the extent to which respondents were skilled in (and at ease with) 'test taking' would determine their ability to complete the exercises successfully.

An equally problematic feature of the so-called 'literacy surveys' is the standard of literacy adopted—the way in which item difficulty is assessed and in which categories of 'literate functioning' are determined. Canada's Southam Literacy Survey deserves special attention in this respect as it rendered perfectly transparent the fundamental *arbitrariness* of the literacy/illiteracy distinction. Unlike the other administrations of the literacy surveys, where the determination of scoring and classification criteria was presumably left to the 'expertise' of the test designers, the Southam research agency convened a 'jury' of Canadians to determine what would constitute 'literate' functioning.[9] The jury was presented with thirty-eight items and asked to determine which, in their individual opinions, were the most fundamental to daily functioning. Although there was far from a consensus among the jurors on what items should be considered fundamental, ten of the items appeared in the selections of four-fifths of the jurors; on this basis, those ten were chosen by the survey agency as the determinants of 'functional literacy'. The agency itself decided that a score of eight correct out of this ten would signify 'functional *literacy*'; a score of seven or less would signify 'functional *illiteracy*'. As the popular report on the survey noted, the jurors had "wanted a much higher

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[9] The jury of twenty-four included well known authors Margaret Atwood and Farley Mowat, Bob White, then president of the Canadian Auto Workers and now president of the Canadian Labour Congress, several representatives of national business associations, an oil industry executive, a former hockey star, a smelter worker and a grain farmer, among others (Creative Research Group, 1987).

level of minimal functional literacy, on average demanding 64 percent (or around 24 items) correct out of the 38 items" (Calamai, 1987:13). But, since "this standard would have meant that 37 percent of Canadian adults were functionally illiterate" (the standard evidently having been set after the results of the survey were known), they opted for the more "lenient" standard of eight correct out of a core of ten items (ibid).

In spite of such a blatant admission of arbitrariness, Southam promoted its survey as the first corrective to the "federal government's arbitrary definition of being literate"—the achievement of a Grade nine education or higher (ibid:7). And, on the basis of its entirely arbitrary definition, the Southam survey claimed to demonstrate that five million adult Canadians (or 24 percent of those over eighteen) were 'functionally illiterate'. Though the arbitrary nature of the scoring and classification systems of the other general surveys are less conspicuous than Southam's was, they have all utilized subjective criteria and the performance levels, though presented as indicative of real 'functional' distinctions, have exhibited significant flexibility from one survey to another.[10]

Other survey data may provide more relevant information about literacy development It seems unlikely, in light of the nature of the literacy surveys, that they reveal much about how well adults' literacy abilities serve them in their daily lives.

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[10] In Canada, for example, two surveys have been conducted by the federal government agency, Statistics Canada—the first in 1989 and the second, as part of a series of international surveys, in 1994. The 1994 survey utilized the same classification system (Levels 1, 2, and so forth) as the 1989 survey. The tasks which had been classed as Levels 1 and 2 in terms of difficulty in 1989, however, were rolled together to constitute Level 1 in 1994. Since respondents still had to score 80 percent accuracy on this new combined Level 1, the proportion of respondents scoring at Level 1 in the 1994 survey (and, thus, the proportion of 'functionally illiterate' adults) would necessarily rise, unless there had been a significant improvement in overall performance on the test in the intervening five years.

The surveys have gathered other data, however, which may provide more insight into this question. All of the surveys, for example, have asked respondents about their reading habits and about their own perceptions of their literacy abilities. Those determined by the Southam survey to be 'illiterate' were reported to be "only slightly less likely than literates to read a newspaper at least once a week—87 percent versus 95 per cent" (Calamai, 1987:17). An even higher proportion of the U.S. National Adult Literacy Survey respondents who performed at the lowest level of literacy reported reading the newspaper at least once a week—92 percent (Kirsch et al., 1993:57). In fact, 52 percent of Southam's allegedly 'illiterate' read a newspaper daily and possessed twenty-five or more books—which, of course, begs the question of what it means to be illiterate (Calamai, 1987:17). Only one in five of those deemed illiterate by the Southam survey "admit[ted] that reading and writing [was] holding them back in their job or elsewhere" (ibid:18). Similarly, in the 1994 Canadian IALS survey, only two percent of all respondents rated their (literacy) skills as poor, in relation to their job demands, and less than 15 percent of respondents who scored at the lower levels saw their skills as "a barrier to better employment" (Statistics Canada, et al., 1996:64-66). It should be noted, however, that the surveys present these discrepancies not as evidence that they may be measuring something other than 'functional literacy' but as evidence of people's lack of self awareness. The lack of awareness is itself presented as a part of the literacy 'crisis' since "without awareness of the need to improve", adults will likely not "seek opportunities to enhance their skills" (ibid:66).

As evidence of the socially constructed nature of North America's crisis of adult 'illiteracy' this last point is especially relevant. For the self-report data which are largely dismissed as just another symptom of the depth of the problem in both Canada and the United States, remain the only empirical basis for statements about adult illiteracy in Britain.

General literacy surveys and worker illiteracy: making the connection The results of the general literacy surveys (even if one were to accept those results as indicative of the condition of literacy) do not support the claim that there is a crisis of worker illiteracy, a point which will be discussed at greater length below. Nevertheless, the most commonly cited evidence in support of a crisis of illiteracy among the workforce is that *assumed* to be provided by the general literacy surveys—and the assumption is that the overall performance of survey respondents is mirrored in the workforce (see, for example, Sharpe, 1990; Zemke, 1989; DesLauriers, 1990; Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, undated). Organized labour has also operated on this assumption in many instances. The director of education for the Ontario Federation of Labour, for example, in a 1989 address to a literacy conference stated: "Literacy is not a theoretical issue for the labour movement. It is very real for us. It is among us—the working class in Canada—that you will find the direct victims of so-called 'illiteracy'...". "They are not the only victims", he went on to say, "but they are the principal ones" (Turk, 1989:1). The New Brunswick Federation of Labour (like the Ontario federation, a member of the Canadian Labour Congress) similarly asserted in a policy statement on literacy, "It is unrealistic to believe that illiteracy in the general population is not reflected in the labour

force" (New Brunswick Federation of Labour, undated). The policy statement went on to conclude that, "Unless there is concerted co-operative action by all components of society, then the prospects for the Canadian and New Brunswick economy competing in [the] global environment in the future are indeed bleak."

Both statements imply an acceptance that there is a significant degree of adult illiteracy in Canadian society—both, in other words, accept the validity of the literacy surveys' results. Yet, that the proportion of the population which scored at the lowest levels of the tests do, in fact, have literacy deficits is far from clear. As the above discussion has noted, by their own reckoning, most of them do not. And there are good reasons to question both the form and standard of literacy dictated by the surveys and the reliability of the testing method as a means of assessing how well people actually perform in non-testing situations.

However, even if we were to accept that what has been measured by the North American 'literacy' surveys is, in fact, literacy competency and that the proportion of the population scoring at the lowest level(s) are 'functionally illiterate', there is absolutely no basis for concluding that this proportion is reflected in the workforce (either employed or unemployed). On the contrary, in both Canada and the United States, the surveys have been applied to random samplings of the adult population aged sixteen (or eighteen) and over, with no upper age limit. The surveyed population has included respondents who spoke a language other than English (or, in Canada, other than French or English) at home. It has also included adults with disabilities which might interfere with their capacity to complete the test or, indeed, which might physically prohibit reading and writing—for example, learning

disability, mental retardation and hearing and visual impairment. In all the surveys, the elderly and the disabled are both over-represented in the populations scoring at the lowest levels. In the U.S. 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, for example, fully one-third of those scoring at level 1 (16 percent of the total sample) were age 65 or older (Kirsch et al., 1993:16-18). And, as the survey report itself notes, 26 percent of those who performed at level 1 (12 percent of all respondents) "said they had a physical, mental, or health condition that kept them from participating fully in work or other activities...". Nineteen percent reported that vision problems made it difficult for them to read print (ibid).

Examining the evidence of worker illiteracy in the literacy survey results The first North American literacy survey of the general population in the 1980s period of renewed literacy campaigning was that conducted by the Southam Press in Canada in 1987. As Chapter 3 documented, the North American literacy campaign had by that time already shifted its focus to the issue of workforce illiteracy.[11] Not surprisingly, then, all of the general surveys have specifically interrogated the literacy/employment relationship.[12] All of the surveys have collected data on respondents' employment/occupational status as well as on the amount of reading

[11] The Project Literacy U.S. media campaign had officially adopted workforce illiteracy as its theme in July 1987, three months before the publication of the Southam survey report.

[12] As already noted, the first U.S. adaptation of the National Assessment of Education Progress was not a survey of the general population but a Department of Labor sponsored survey of selected unemployed/job seekers—Job Training Partnership Act and Employment Service/Unemployment Insurance program participants. Administered in 1989-90, the results of the survey were published in a 1992 report, *Beyond the School Doors: The Literacy Needs of Job Seekers Served by the U.S. Department of Labor* (Kirsch, et al., 1992). It would be 1992 before the first NAEP-based general literacy survey, the National Adult Literacy Survey, was conducted in the United States (Kirsch et al., 1993).

they do at work and their own assessment of the adequacy of their literacy competencies to the requirements of their work and their prospects for promotion.

Performance on the North American general 'literacy' surveys has been higher among the workforce (whether employed or unemployed) than among the general population. This is to be expected since, as noted, the surveys have all included a significant proportion of adults beyond labour force participation age as well as many individuals whose reasons for low performance on the tests would also have prohibited them from participating in the workforce. The picture for the workforce(s) in general does not, in fact, indicate a problem of worker illiteracy; on the contrary, in all occupational categories a significant proportion of workers exhibit advanced levels of literacy competency. Canada's 1989 survey, for example, found that 70 percent of all employed respondents (and 65 percent of those without permanent work) scored at Level 4, the highest level of literacy proficiency measured (Statistics Canada, 1991:38-39). And between 60 and 67 percent of the unemployed (depending of length of unemployment) also scored at the highest level of literacy proficiency measured (ibid).

These results have essentially been replicated in the surveys (both American and Canadian) which have been conducted since. When it is taken into account that the tests themselves are fundamentally academic in their orientation (and, thus, both different from and more challenging than most workers' daily uses of literacy competencies), the significance of high scoring on the tests is even greater. Level 4 exercises on the 1989 Canadian survey, for example, required "considerable text-searching and interpretations to be made about the text. One item ... required

respondents to read a lengthy newspaper article and judge the evidence used to support a central claim of the author" (Statistics Canada, 1991:18). The surveys have also found that the majority of workers who have scored at the lower levels of the tests are in jobs with little or no reading/writing demands and that, where such demands exist, respondents report that their literacy competencies are adequate to the tasks.[13]

Workplace basic skills assessments and employer surveys: constructing the workforce illiteracy problem As Chapter 3 documented, initial claims for a crisis of worker illiteracy referred to the general critique of workforce quality provided in the context of the educational reform movement. A 1982 report by a private New York-based agency, the Centre for Public Resources, had set the stage for many of the subsequent claims about both the nature and the extent of the cost of illiterate workers to industry.[14] As already noted, the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL), as early as 1985, was citing unspecified research to support claims that worker illiteracy cost business and industry billions of dollars annually. As was also observed in Chapter 3, one of the first business-initiated literacy campaign activities in Canada had been the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy's (CBTFL) 1988 production of a report on the costs of illiteracy to

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[13] On all the literacy surveys a proportion of workers in the clerical, sales and service, agricultural, craft workers and machine operators have scored at Level I. In the Canadian 1994 IALS survey, for example, 6 percent of clerical workers and 28 percent of machine operators scored at this level (Statistics Canada et al., 1996:41). Of those scoring at Level 1, however, 44 percent reported little or no reading requirements at work and a significant majority rated their reading, writing and mathematics skills as either good or excellent in relation to their job demands (ibid:64).

[14] The report is cited, for example, in *Business and Health* (Koen, 1988), *Management World* (Goddard, 1989), and in a report on workplace literacy by the American Management Association (Skagen, 1986).

Canadian business. Coming just months after the publication of the Southam literacy survey, the CBTFL report capitalized on the 'shock horror' value of Southam's literacy statistics. But the report itself was simply a recapitulation of the unsubstantiated claims in circulation in the American campaign. By its own admission, it had not gathered statistical evidence but had depended on "estimates and educated guesses of experts". This caveat notwithstanding, the report actually put forward rather precise calculations: $2.5 billion in lost productivity, including poor product quality and extra supervisory time; $1.6 billion in costs associated with industrial accidents (workers' compensation, loss of production, machinery down-time); and $5 million on remedial skills training (CBTFL, 1988b). The calculations were presented by the Canadian media—and generally accepted by the public, policy makers and, to a large extent, trades unions—as actual assessed costs.

As the campaign to make an issue of worker illiteracy progressed, efforts to demonstrate the economic impacts of illiteracy increased. Those engaged in marketing literacy services to employers used the generally promoted statistics on adult illiteracy to argue that illiteracy was widespread among the workforce, but they also generated their own data. In some cases, literacy organizations surveyed representative samples of business and industry in their jurisdictions in order to substantiate the problem and demonstrate the need for intervention.[15] Others directed their surveying and marketing more narrowly—targeting all of the businesses in a shopping mall, for example, or specific business or industrial sectors in

[15] Indeed, as Chapter 3 noted, the first such employer surveys were conducted as early as 1981 by the Minnesota Literacy Council with funding from B. Dalton Booksellers.

their region (see, for example, Waugh, 1992). In some cases, educational providers offered companies customized tests of English and mathematics for the direct assessment of workers (see, for example, Seneca College, undated). Others offered employers a more 'generic' assessment, applied to the entire workforce or sections of it. On the basis of such a generic assessment, for example, England's Workbase Training made claims about the incidence of basic skill deficit in general, as well as in particular employment sectors.[16] All such surveys have utilized their own standards of minimal (or optimal) literacy competencies. And the diagnosis of worker deficit (an inevitable outcome of all such assessments) has been based on these imposed standards—not, generally, on how workers, as individuals, perform their work tasks.

On the basis of the data provided by such surveys and assessments, as well as the evidence of general literacy surveys, literacy coalitions and providers developed information kits, brochures and audio-visual presentations which purported to document the worker illiteracy problem. These were distributed widely to employers and employer groups; boards of trade and chambers of commerce were targeted for formal presentations (see, for example, McIntyre, 1991). For many involved in the organization of volunteers as well as for those involved in the delivery of literacy education, business contributions to their organizations or business purchase of their service was an end in itself. For business literacy organizations such as the Business Council for Effective Literacy and the Canadian

[16] Based on an assessment of staff in one health authority hospital, for example, it was stated that 80 percent of staff had basic skills difficulties (Taw, 1990:2).

Business Task Force on Literacy—as well as for many of the main corporate sponsors of the literacy campaign—capturing broad business support for the issue was a means of increasing pressure on governments to fund the literacy initiatives and workplace training they wished to see funded.

Business awareness of worker illiteracy as a problem prior to the campaigning activities attests to its fundamentally socially constructed nature. Skagen (1986:13) reported that a study by the (American) Centre for Public Resources had found that the "overwhelming majority of executives interviewed do *not* consider literacy a critical problem as far as the workplace is concerned" (emphasis in original). An informal survey of the Canadian Manufacturer's Association in 1985 had similarly revealed no concern at all with the issue (Ritts, 1986). And many early efforts to involve business in the issue fell on deaf ears. Shortly after the publication of the CBTFL's report, for example, its president observed that "business people can't conceive they have a *literacy* problem. They perceive that workers are sloppy, won't follow instructions, and are generally less productive than they should be ... [but] in their minds a literacy problem is not even a possibility ... " (CBTFL, 1988b). The popular report on the Southam literacy survey also noted that two agencies funded by the federal government to deliver workplace literacy programmes in 1987 had been having considerable difficulty persuading employers to let them in the door (Calamai, 1987: 37-39).

The express purpose of the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy's report on the costs of illiteracy to business was to persuade employers that illiteracy was a problem they should concern themselves with (CBTFL, 1988b). This was also a

fundamental reason for the existence of the Business Council for Effective Literacy in the United States and, indeed—as Chapter 3 discussed—of the entire 1980s North American literacy campaign. By 1990, there was evidence that the campaign was achieving its objective in this respect. In stark contrast to the 1985 informal poll of Canadian manufacturers, for example, a 1990 survey of private and public sector employers by the Conference Board of Canada found that "70 per cent of Canadian establishments employing over 50 people were aware of significant literacy deficits affecting from 1 to more than 30 per cent of their workforce" (DesLauriers, 1990:2). The survey had asked "human resource executives, general managers of operations, training and development managers, and others ... to estimate the extent of illiteracy among employees in their organization, the characteristics of those employees, and the impact any skills deficits were having on organizational objectives" (ibid:vii).

By now, the campaign had evidently done its work. The 'fact' of worker illiteracy was not the question; only the extent and the nature of that illiteracy and the impact on the organization needed to be assessed. As sociologist, Dorothy Smith (1993) has documented, the general success of the workforce literacy campaign had begun to be manifested in the local discovery of worker 'incompetence' in Canada as early as 1988, in the immediate wake of the Southam and CBTFL reports. She provides an analysis of an interview conducted with the new manager of a small fibreglass manufacturing company in Ontario where, she suggests, the discourse of workforce illiteracy had been assimilated into a general problematizing of the locally recruited workforce.

Although the North American 1980s literacy campaigning had little parallel in England in the period, the promotion of business involvement in the issue has been more closely paralleled since the late 1980s. And one campaigning strategy which would be borrowed directly from North America was the 'costing' of illiteracy through employer survey. In 1990, as one of its International Literacy Year initiatives, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, with financial assistance from a private corporation and the Training Enterprise and Education Directorate of the Employment Department, commissioned a survey "to attempt to estimate the cost to industry of poor basic skills" (Kempa, 1993:5). The report of that survey, *The Cost To Industry: Basic Skills and the UK Workforce*, was published in 1993. The report's preface made clear the North American influence: "Although estimates of the cost of poor basic skills to industry have been produced in the United States and Canada", Peter Davis, the Chairman of ALBSU, wrote, "we do not have similar information for the UK" (ibid).

The English survey, like its North American prototypes, essentially set out to validate the assumptions on which the promotion of workplace literacy over the previous several years had been based. As with the Canadian Conference Board's survey, the question was not *whether* illiteracy (or basic skills deficits) was a problem; that was taken for granted in the survey design. "What we wanted to know", the preface noted, was "how much could be saved if employees had better basic skills and how much more productive industry would be if people at work could communicate, read, write and calculate better" (ibid). The survey's aims were: "to establish levels of basic skills difficulties among the workforce *as*

encountered or perceived by employers" (emphasis added) and "to quantify and describe the costs to employers of poor basic skills and the effect of these on their operation" (ibid:7). Respondents (chiefly personnel or training managers from private sector companies employing 51 or more persons) were asked in an average 25 minute telephone interview to assess their staffs' reading, writing, numeracy and oral communications skills on a scale of one to five.[17] They were also asked to assess the impact of assumed basic skills deficiencies on individuals and the company and to assess actual costs to the company of assumed productivity losses, errors and extraordinary measures necessitated by basic skills deficits. It is revealing that the results of the English employer survey, in the absence of a broad-based campaign, were far more equivocal than the North American surveys. When asked an unprompted question about the effect of staff basic skills problems on their own organizations, for example, more than half replied that there were no effects and a further 17 percent replied that they didn't know. Only a very few respondents spontaneously identified specific effects of basic skills problems (ibid:26-27).

The transparency of low literacy competencies in the workplace Much of the discussion of workforce illiteracy presents it as a largely unrecognized (and frequently concealed) condition. The validity of educational credentials as indicators of literacy competency and, thus, as screening criteria has been widely questioned (Kirsch et al., 1992; Kempa, 1993; Statistics Canada et al., 1995). In fact,

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[17] The actual breakdown of interviews was 94 percent from the private sector, three percent from state owned enterprises, and three percent from "privatised state" companies (Kempa, 1993:7).

the evidence of the North American literacy surveys points to the *transparency* of the 'illiteracy' which is measured by the surveys. All the surveys reveal a direct, positive correlation between educational attainment and performance on the tests. The 1994 Canadian IALS survey, for example, found that fewer than 10 percent of secondary school graduates performed at Level 1, even though this level in the IALS survey represented the *two* lower levels of the 1989 survey (Statistics Canada, et al., 1996:24). Of those who had performed at Level I in the 1992 U.S. National Adult Literacy Survey, fully one-quarter had been born in another country and, as the survey report notes, "some of them were undoubtedly recent immigrants with a limited command of English" (Kirsch et al., 1993:16-18).

The primary source of information on the incidence of general adult illiteracy in England, as noted, is the National Child Development Study, a longitudinal survey of children born in England, Scotland and Wales in one month in 1958. Unlike the North American surveys, then, the British data on adult illiteracy is confined to the native-born and, thus, entirely excludes immigrants. As in North America, however, literacy difficulties relating to first-language status are generally transparent in the workplace, as they are elsewhere. And the information provided by the National Child Development Study on native-born adults with literacy difficulties indicates that, as in North America, there is a close correspondence between reported difficulties and educational qualification. Of those who reported reading problems at the age of twenty-three, for example, three-quarters had no qualification and only three percent had any qualification above 'O' level or craft equivalent (Hamilton and Stasinopoulos, 1987:32).

What this means is that employers are unlikely to *unknowingly* hire those deemed 'illiterate' by the North American literacy surveys since the overwhelming majority of applicants who fall into this category will either not possess a high school diploma or not speak English (or French) fluently. Similarly, those reporting reading difficulties in the British National Child Development Study will generally possess little or no formal qualification. And, as in North America, literacy difficulties relating to first language status are generally self-evident. In either case, most employers who knowingly hire applicants with limited proficiency in the language of the workplace or with low educational qualification do so either because literacy competencies are perceived as not necessary to the job or because other qualities (relevant experience and good work history, for example) are seen to outweigh any educational/literacy shortcoming (Atkinson and Papworth, 1991). Indeed, it seems likely that, in many cases, employers actually perceive advantages for themselves in the employees' relative disadvantage. They may, for example, place greater value on maintaining a stable workforce than in having a more highly literate workforce. Where jobs are unsatisfying or the pay and conditions poor, this goal is more likely to be achieved with employees who have fewer choices because of either low formal qualifications or lack of facility with the language. A workplace literacy coordinator with a Canadian volunteer literacy organization, for example, reported that she was "shocked when several companies bluntly said they didn't care about illiteracy among their employees" (quoted in Calamai, 1987:38). She reported the manager of a meat-packing plant as saying, "My employees don't need to read and write, they just need to cut meat". Another, she reported, "came

right out and said they wanted to keep their employees stupid or else they'd leave for better jobs" (ibid). Similarly, a report on England's Workbase Training observed that one managing director responded to the identification of a need for basic skills training, after a long period of negotiation, with hostility: "Why are we paying for these people to read and write when they don't need to? You're not having a budget for this!" (Taw, 1991:355).

THE EVIDENCE FOR INCREASING LITERACY REQUIREMENTS AT WORK: A CASE OF OVERQUALIFICATION RATHER THAN ILLITERACY?

In spite of the evidence that workers in general possess quite high levels of literacy proficiency, the results of literacy surveys in North America have, nevertheless, supported claims that many workers are insufficiently 'literate'. The fact than *any* workers score at the lowest literacy level(s) measured by the tests provides the basis for such claims. The assumption which underlies the problematizing of *any* and *all* evidence of alleged low literacy competencies among workers is that all work involves significant reading and writing and demands relatively high levels of literacy competency. From this perspective, all workers should ideally perform at the highest level(s) of literacy competency.

The case for significant reading requirements in all jobs The assumption that all classes of work entail significant reading—and that this will inevitably increase in the future—has, in fact, been a central supposition of workforce literacy promotion on both sides of the Atlantic. The assumption is, of course, generally consistent with the theory of a 'new economy' where only highly skilled jobs requiring highly educated polyvalent workers will remain. But, in addition to the 'new economy'

arguments—and within the specific context of the workforce literacy campaigns and the promotion of workplace literacy programmes—there has also emerged an explicit set of arguments about the reading requirements of work. The principal 'evidence' on which these arguments have been based in North America is derived from a 1981 U.S. study by Larry Mikulecky, funded by the National Institute of Education—the same study (discussed in Chapter 4) which gave rise to the 'reading to learn versus reading to do' theory of workplace literacy.

On the basis of his survey of the reading patterns of a sample of 150 workers from a variety of occupations, Mikulecky (1981) concluded that workers are required to read, on average, for 143 minutes in an eight hour work day, or nearly one-third of the working day. Though he conceded that the workers' high average time was influenced by high scores among professional and clerical workers (162 minutes and 204 minutes respectively), he claimed that even blue-collar workers reported reading 97 minutes daily—fully one-fifth of their working day.[18] Based on the application of a 'readability' formula developed for technical material in the armed forces, he also concluded that the material which workers were required to read averaged a grade level of 11.2. Blue-collar workers' reading materials were reported to have averaged a grade 10.5 level of difficulty. Mikulecky's findings—though hardly credible—have become the conventional wisdom and the basis for virtually all claims that workers must be highly competent in reading in order to do practically any job (see, for example, Maynard, 1989; Evetts and Flanagan,

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[18] Mikulecky is quoted in a Canadian article on workplace literacy, describing the nature of this 97 minutes of reading: "Often it was three minutes here, two minutes there—forms, directions or a memo that showed where you had to drive a forklift truck to pick up something" (Calamai, 1987:19)

1991; New Brunswick Federation of Labour, undated). In England, much of the promotion of workplace literacy programming has also been based on an assumption that all work requires reading and writing beyond the skills of a proportion of the workforce (see, for example, Bonnerjea, 1990). The 1990 survey of employers by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skill Unit reported that almost all blue collar grades (and the majority of those working at operative level) are expected to use basic skills as part of their job (Kempa, 1993:16).

The contrary evidence: many jobs require little or no exercise of literacy competencies It cannot be disputed that workers may derive benefit from well developed literacy competencies, regardless of the requirements of their jobs. The exercise of literacy skills may be relevant to questions of worker rights, trades union participation and health and safety considerations, among other issues. However, there is little evidence to support the contention that all jobs require (or even allow) the exercise of literacy skills. On the contrary, evidence suggests that not only do workers in general have little opportunity to exercise their literacy competencies to the full, but many jobs require either minimal literacy skills or none at all. In a study of the long-term unemployed in England, for example, it was reported that many people "did not perceive their literacy as a barrier to obtaining work, because they had needed to do little or no reading and writing in the jobs they had done before" (Hamilton and Davies, 1993:10). Indeed, of the presumed 13 percent of British adults with low literacy competencies (as extrapolated from the 1981 National Child Development Study), less than one quarter reported difficulties in relation to work (Hamilton and Stasinopoulos, 1987:18). This is supported by the

findings of a study conducted at the Institute of Manpower Studies (University of Sussex) on literacy and less skilled jobs (Atkinson and Papworth, 1991). The study, which was based on a survey of employers, found that nearly 40 percent of the employers surveyed claimed they would be prepared to hire a person with known reading problems; just under 50 percent said they would hire a candidate with writing problems. And nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that they would be prepared to offset literacy shortcomings against other characteristics or strengths such as good work records or relevant experience, for example. The study found that employers' hiring criteria varied according to the job and reflected, in large measure, their assessment of the importance of reading and writing to the job. Six out of ten recruiters to cleaning and catering jobs, for example, indicated a willingness to hire individuals who could not read.[19]

The report of the 1994 Canadian IALS survey has noted that individuals who scored at Level 1 but reported that their skills were excellent in relation to the demands of their job are probably not overstating the case. Forty-four percent of workers who scored at Level 1 reported that there "was no reading task [of those listed in the survey] they did at least once a week" (Statistics Canada et al., 1996:64). Only 4 percent at this level reported doing all the reading tasks listed

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[19] The study actually found that nine out of ten recruiters to cleaning and catering jobs did not regard reading skills as vital to the job. Four out of ten, nevertheless, would require reading ability in a candidate. The authors surmise that employers often identify workplace requirements for literacy unrelated to the main tasks of the job. As Graff (1979), Street (1990), and Levine (1986), among others, have observed, however, literacy competency (and educational attainment) are also typically viewed as indicative of a range of intellectual and attitudinal attributes which employers would value—including, for example, rationality, diligence, persistence and reliability. This—part and parcel of the 'mythology' of literacy—is also undoubtedly a factor in employers' preference for 'literate' workers even where the job does not actually require (or even allow) the exercise of literacy skills.

once a week (ibid). Indeed, the reports of both the Canadian IALS survey and the 1992 U.S. National Adult Literacy Survey indicated that the lack of opportunity to exercise reading and writing skills at work may actually contribute to the erosion of adult literacy competencies over time (ibid; Kirsch et al., 1993).

Berg's (1970) research has questioned the extent to which any particular occupational classification may be said to embody a consistent intellectual/educational content.[20] And the evidence of the North American literacy surveys points to considerable variation in tested competencies within and across occupational categories. In the Canadian 1994 IALS survey, for example, the proportion of respondents who scored at the highest level of skill was virtually identical for service/sales workers and officials/managers. Indeed, while one quarter of service/sales workers scored at the highest level measured, half of all professional workers did not (Statistics Canada et al., 1996:41).

The limitations of 'job literacy' research It is likely that any standard assessment of reading skills (whether at the level of nation, industrial sector or workplace) would fail to indicate the adequacy of workers' literacy skills for the particular demands of their jobs. Even direct measures of particular jobs (such as constitute the 'literacy task analyses' of much workplace literacy practice) fail to account for the variable ways in which written material may be read or the relative importance

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[20] The error of associating high technology occupations with high skill content, for example, is underlined by the results of a Stanford University study of successful high-technology companies in California's Silicon Valley. As Weisman notes, "contrary to the rhetoric of escalating skill requirements, workers were largely isolated from tasks that were deemed too difficult or complex" (1993:368). The researchers concluded that the most striking of their findings was "the low level of basic skills ... required for successful performance." They did not observe "any skill requirement that could not be achieved with a solid eighth-grade education" (Finnan et al., 1990, quoted in Weisman, 1993:368).

of the printed material relating to a job. Many researchers undoubtedly make the mistake of treating all reading material as they might a narrative or expository text and, thus, overstate both the time and skill required to complete work-related reading. A statement by the director of the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy's study of the costs of illiteracy to business exemplifies this tendency. An automotive technician, he remarked, "must be able to absorb 92,000 pages worth of complex written material in order to work on one year's models". He contrasts this with his 1200-page edition of the complete works of Shakespeare, implying that the former required a great deal more reading than the latter (quoted in Maynard, 1989:90).

Indeed, there is good reason to believe that the ideas which prevail in the workplace literacy research about the amount of reading workers have to do and about the value of/necessity for reading and writing in accomplishing tasks are a reflection of the value systems and the habits of the researchers rather than the results of objective analyses of what actually happens or ought to happen in the workplace. Evetts and Flanagan, in their discussion of attitudes to training among the trades, point out that 'book learning' "has been seen as a poor substitute for the practical, common sense knowledge learned on-the-job (sic). Any young apprentice soon discovers that doing the job 'by the book' is likely to be met with amusement or derision. Older workers know that too much thinking while engaged in work processes is counterproductive, and familiarity with the work processes allows them to shortcut and simplify procedures" (1991:284). Gowen found, in her case study of a workplace literacy programme in the southern United States, that managers'

attitudes and values might also account for the imposition of literacy requirements onto jobs which have no intrinsic need for them. She notes that, "Placed in a work environment where reading and writing were not required to perform the job, employees were still defined as illiterate in part because they did not interact with text in the manner management believed was appropriate. While management thought productive and cooperative employees must focus on text, employees believed that the most efficient way to execute their jobs and to gain information was through oral, face-to-face communication contextualized in the particulars of the moment" (undated:12). She quotes a housekeeping aide who was a participant in the workplace programme: "What do he know? If I did my job the way he [the manager] said [in the printed Weekly Tips created as reading material for the programme], I'd never finish" (ibid).

Even when jobs entail reading—as reading specialist, Frank Smith, has observed—the reading tends to be limited and repetitive and fairly quickly mastered. "Mechanics", Smith notes, "quickly learn to read their manuals, short-order cooks learn to read orders, and servers learn to write them, even if they would fail standardized reading tests" (1989:354 quoted in Kazemek, 1991:54). "In other words," Kazemek concludes, "literacy is a practice which enhances specific literacy skills as they are carried out in specific situations" (ibid). This is confirmed in Kazemek's report of an informal survey of his own town in the western United States. After interviewing and observing "employees and supervisors in various occupations, for example, supermarket cashiers, stock clerks, waiters and waitresses, counter help in different fast-food restaurants, cooks, bartenders, factory

help on the assembly line, carpet layers, and so on," he concluded that "the kinds of literacy used on such jobs are not only rudimentary but often very specialized as well"[21] (ibid).

The match between education levels and jobs: present and future In respect of Canada, Boothby (1993) has argued that the reading requirements of work (as assessed by respondents in the 1989 Canadian literacy survey) closely reflect the educational requirements for jobs as presented in the General Educational Development (GED) ratings of Canada's federal employment department. But, as he has also demonstrated, neither the reading requirements nor the educational requirements of work in Canada are closely matched with the competency of workers. The mismatch, however, does not arise from workers' lack of requisite literacy skill or educational level, but the opposite. For, as Boothby has observed, over 40 percent of those with jobs at GED level 2, and over 50 percent of those with jobs at GED level 3 (3.5 million workers together) read at reading ability levels 4 and 5 (1993:32). In contrast, he notes, "fewer than 200,000 respondents at reading levels 1 and 2 held jobs at GED levels 4 and 5" (ibid).

Livingstone (1996) argues that the mismatch—what he terms an "education-jobs gap"—may be even greater than this. His analysis of recent Canadian trends indicates that the relationship between the educational requirements of jobs and the actual demands of the work has become more tenuous as the increasing availability of better educated applicants over the past decade and a half has resulted in an

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[21] He illustrates the "specialization" which he encountered, as follows: "BB" (bacon burger), Wich (fish sandwich) ... are the kinds of writing the counter workers use and the kind of reading the short-order cooks do at my favourite fast-food lunch shop" (Kazemek, 1991:54).

escalation of the 'credential inflation' tendency. Citing 1989 Canadian data on the 'formal mismatch' between employees' educational attainments and the job-entry requirements established by employers, he notes that "nearly a third of all employed university graduates had jobs that did not need a degree, over 40 per cent of those with college certificates had jobs which required less formal schooling, and about a third of the workers with high school diplomas had jobs that did not need those diplomas" (1996:80-81). And while the process of credential inflation had resulted, in this same period, in about a third of workers with high school diplomas or less formal education holding jobs for which they had become formally 'underqualified' (as a result of formal entry requirements rising to post-secondary while they were in the positions), only a small minority of those workers see themselves as actually underqualified. For, as Livingstone notes, it is older workers who are more likely to have become 'credentially underqualified', but they are "not ... likely to rate themselves as underqualified for jobs they have often performed for a long time with extensive on-the-job learning" (ibid). Though credential inflation has worked to disguise the "education-jobs gap", as Livingstone observes, the high proportion of workers who are either formally overqualified for their work or who subjectively assess themselves to be overqualified in relation to the demands of their jobs points to a real and growing problem—and a problem of exactly the opposite nature to that which much current rhetoric and analyses would suggest. His conclusions are supported by evidence on job skills and the service economy in Canada (Myles and Fawcett, 1990).

In respect of the United States, Rumberger (1984) has reported that the number of college graduates in the labour market increased threefold between 1960 and 1980, with the result that by 1980 almost 20 percent of all U.S. workers (and more than 25 percent of young workers) had completed four years or more of college (1984:343). He also notes, however, that the growth in the number of highly skilled jobs did not keep pace and, as a consequence, it is estimated that from 25 to 50 percent of recent college graduates are overqualified for their current jobs (ibid). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there was an estimated surplus of 3.8 million college graduates in the American labour force in 1980 (ibid).

Although extensive participation in higher education is a more recent phenomenon in England, a recent study by the Confederation of British Industry (1994) indicates that the trend in that country is similar to the North American case. The study reports that "many graduates are now entering first and second jobs which had traditionally been filled by school-leavers" and that "at least a quarter of private sector employers substituted graduates for non-graduates between 1985 and 1988" (quoted in Brown, 1994:612). As Brown notes, the increased recruitment of graduates was not a result of increased demand for education stemming from technological innovation but, more likely, a result of credential inflation and the fact that employers "believe that (graduates) have the appropriate social and personal skills required in 'leaner' and more 'flexible' organizations" (ibid).

In spite of the strong evidence of significant overeducation (in relation to the demands of paid work), there remains considerable support for the argument that workers in general are *underprepared*. In large measure, claims of worker

underpreparedness are sustained, not in terms of current performance in existing jobs, but on the basis of assumptions about the changing nature of work. The conviction that work is in the process of radical overall 'upskilling', and that the pace of change in the skill composition of work will become even more rapid in the near future, underlies arguments for continuing high (individual) investments in higher education. And, as discussed in the preceding chapter, it is also the basis for much of the workforce illiteracy diagnosis.

Many analysts have challenged these assumptions. Mishel and Teixeira, for example, have provided a systematic critique of one of the most influential American 'upskilling' texts, *Workforce 2000*, a report prepared by the conservative Hudson Institute for the U.S. Department of Labor (Johnston and Packer, 1987). The report's analysis of future job skill requirements was based on an interpretation of forecasted occupational shifts. The authors argued that "the jobs created between 1987 and 2000 will be substantially different from those in existence today. A number of jobs in the least-skilled classes will disappear while high-skilled professions will grow rapidly. Overall, the skill mix of the economy will be moving rapidly upscale, with most new jobs demanding more education and higher levels of language, math and reasoning skills" (Johnston and Packer: 96).

Analyzing the same data (from the Bureau of Labor Statistics) on which the authors of *Workforce 2000* based their claims, Mishel and Teixeira (1991) take issue with both the claim that shifts in the distribution of jobs will result in overall upskilling and the contention that changes in the tasks required in given jobs will have the effect of increasing the skill composition of those jobs. With respect to

the first claim, they note that there is "much less change ... occurring in the overall distribution of jobs" than is generally believed (1991:101). While they concede that the fastest occupational growth is in some of the most highly skilled occupational groups, they note that these groups are relatively quite small to begin with and, even given relatively higher growth, net employment in these groups will remain small. They observe that the data in *Workforce 2000* itself show that the five most highly skilled occupational groups (including the three fastest-growing groups) will constitute only 10.6 percent of net new jobs between 1984 and 2000 and, by 2000, will still make up only 6.1 percent of the overall job pool (ibid). Within highly skilled occupational groups, there are also gender-based differences in skill requirements. A study by the Economic Council of Canada, for example, classes skill requirements for females in the information sector as intermediate (similar to those in the distributive services) in contrast to the high skill requirements for males in this sector (Myles and Fawcett, 1990:4).

Mishel and Teixeira also report that any growth in high-skill jobs is counterbalanced by a shift towards relatively low-skill occupations in the service sector. Low level service occupations (including cooks, waiters, household workers, janitors, and security guards), they note, will provide 23 percent of net new jobs in the sixteen year period and, by 2000, will continue to make up 16.8 percent of the overall job pool[22] (1991:101). Rumberger notes that, of the 10 largest growth occupations (in absolute numbers) only one (nursing) even requires a college

[22] Kazemek (1991), citing data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, reports that the largest number of new jobs in the United States in this period will be in the sales and service areas; and retail clerks will constitute the single biggest employment expansion.

degree (1984:344). And, with respect to the discussion of whether "old jobs demand new skills", Mishel and Teixeira argue that there is little evidence of large-scale skill upgrading. Although some jobs are being substantially upgraded, this appears to be confined to what they identify as "best practice" firms which, as they note, are "far from typical".[23] On the other hand are the large numbers of occupations which involve advanced technology but utilize it in a way which, from the worker's perspective, leads neither to the exercise of advanced skills nor to higher wages (ibid:101-102). They note that the average level of language skill required for all jobs (as expressed in the General Educational Development index) is projected to rise by only 3.6 percent over the sixteen-year period from 1984 to 2000—a rise which they rate as insignificant (ibid:100). One might also argue, with Braverman, that the notion of average skill is meaningless and that even this marginal increase cannot be averaged over all jobs but must reflect an actual rise in some jobs and none (or even a decline) in others. Mishel and Teixeira's analysis is pertinent to the examination of the upskilling thesis in both Canada and England and is supported by a number of reports and analyses in these two countries as well as others in the United States.[24]

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[23] This is also reported to be the case in Britain where a recent study by the Confederation of British Industry found that only 10 percent of UK-based companies could be classified as "innovative" and "dependent on people with high levels of knowledge and skills" (reported in Brown, 1994:611).

[24] See, for example, Livingstone (1996); Brown (1994, 1995); Myles and Fawcett (1990); Rumberger (1984); and Kazemek (1991). The Report of the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce (1990) noted that 95 percent of American companies still cling to forms of work organization that place more importance on "being reliable, steady and willing to follow directions" than on being educated (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990:3). Most American employers, the Commission found, reported no shortage of highly skilled people (because the work does not require high skills) and most foresee no such shortage in the future. "Most employers we interviewed do not expect their skill requirements to change. Despite the widespread presumption that advancing technology and the evolving service economy will create jobs requiring higher skills, only

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS IN THE LABOUR FORCE ILLITERACY OR DISCRIMINATION?

In one version of the workforce illiteracy construct, the primary source of increased (and anticipated critical levels of) worker illiteracy is the changing demographic profile of the labour force (Philippi, 1988; Taw, 1990; Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, undated*a*). In this set of arguments, the problem is not primarily that of a previously adequate workforce becoming inadequate in the face of a rapidly changing workplace; what is argued, rather, is that demographic change over generations is forcing employers to recruit from the ranks of those who have *never* been considered good quality labour.

Problematizing ethnicity and gender The strongest arguments for an impending demography-based worker literacy crisis have been presented in the United States where a much more heterogeneous ethnic mix and, over the past decade and a half, a relatively much lower unemployment rate have given rise to a quite different social dynamic than has characterized either Canada or England in the same period. U.S. claims about the impending demographic 'crunch' refer to the projected decline in the number of native white males entering the workforce in the 1985-2000 period. *Workforce 2000*, for example, stated that "White males, thought of only a generation ago as the mainstay of the economy, will comprise only 15 percent of the net additions to the labour force between 1985 and 2000" (Johnston and Packer, 1987:95). As Mishel and Teixeira point out, however, the 15 percent refers to *net* new workforce entrants, those "who represent a new addition to the

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five percent of employers were concerned about a skills shortage. These were mainly large manufacturers, financial service organizations and communications companies" (ibid).

overall size of the workforce", rather than either actual entrants or the total workforce (1991:102). As they note, about one-third of actual new entrants to the U.S. workforce in the period will, in fact, be white (non-Hispanic) males and fully two-thirds will be white (non-Hispanic) males and females. The total change in the U.S. workforce as projected for the fifteen-year period—far from representing a demographic revolution—will see a drop in the proportion of non-Hispanic whites from 79 to 74 percent and a rise in the proportion of blacks and Hispanics from 18 to 22 percent (ibid).

The critical distinction between net and actual change in the demographic makeup of the workforce has been glossed over in popular accounts of the impending demographic crisis, however. A 1988 *Business Week* account of the putative 'problem', for example, juxtaposes a pictorial representation of the 1985 labour force dominated by the figure of a white male (representing 47 percent of the total workforce) towering over the other figures (representing white females, nonwhite males, and so forth) against a representation of the new entrants in the 1985-2000 period (Nussbaum, 1988: 102-3). In the second representation the white male has shrunk to 15 percent, visually the same size as the 13 percent immigrant male and the nonwhite female, though still larger than the American-born nonwhite males. This second graphic has a white female towering over all the others, representing 42 percent of new entrants. The visual image entirely obscures the distinction between actual and net new entrants and gives the impression that white American-born men will constitute a very small proportion of the U.S. workforce in the near future.

What the *Business Week* presentation of the 'demographic time bomb' reveals—and this is repeated in numerous mainstream media accounts of the problem as well as in official reports such as *Workforce 2000*—is that it is, at base, an expression of racial/ethnic prejudice and a reaction to the fact that low unemployment has forced some employers to abandon racist hiring practices. A key factor directly bearing on the supposed demographic 'problem' has been that, as wages have declined for workers with a high school diploma, individuals who have the means have increasingly chosen to go on to acquire postsecondary qualifications—thus leaving a smaller (and less white) pool of applicants for entry-level work[25] (Skagen, 1986). As the American *Business and Health* magazine described the problem, expert projections of an increasing workforce illiteracy problem are based on the end of the baby boom: "when the post-baby boom generation reaches the labor market", the report claims, employers will be "forced to rely on previously unemployable segments of the population to fill job vacancies" (Koen, 1988:18). The 'previously unemployable' are identified in the report as "high school dropouts, minorities and immigrants" (ibid).

Other mainstream American accounts of the coming crisis include gender, along with ethnicity, in the composition of the 'undesirable' labour force[26] (see, for

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[25] Mishel and Teixeira report that real wages have dramatically fallen for U.S. workers who lack a college degree (three-fourths of the workforce) since the late 1970s: "Hourly compensation of nonsupervisory workers (about 80 percent of the wage and salaried workforce)", they note, "fell 0.6 percent annually between 1979 and 1988" (1991:99). Rumberger (1981, 1984) and Gordon (1996b) report more comprehensively on this trend.

[26] Indeed, the gender/race/ethnicityaspect of the projected demographic shift has also been identified in most official sources as the cause of the (impending) literacy crisis. For example, the Massachusetts Commonwealth Literacy Campaign (a state government initiative) noted in its employers' 'guide' to setting up basic skills programs at the workplace, "As the workforce grows older, includes more women, and becomes racially and ethnically more diverse toward the year 2000, no small business or industry

example, Bernardon, 1989). Many presentations of the 'problem' exhibit blatant racist and sexist attitudes. "Once upon a simpler time not so long ago", asserted a *Business Week* Special Report on the anticipated human capital crunch, "'workforce' meant white men in ties or blue collars" (Erlich and Garland, 1988:112). Although the report conceded that 30% of all women had been in the work force since the Second World War and that 'Negro', 'Oriental', and 'Spanish-American' workers "always have helped to do America's work", few employers, given a plentiful labour supply, it asserted, "had to reach beyond the male Caucasian in his prime except for the least wanted jobs." Now, the report lamented, the years of "picky hiring" are over and employers will have to look to the "nonmale, the nonwhite, and the nonyoung" to fill jobs (ibid). It should be noted that the 'nonyoung', represented in the report as primarily retired white males, are not actually portrayed as a problem.

In England, similar demographic shifts are cited in making the case for the necessity of basic skills training. And, though it is not presented in the racist and sexist manner of the *Business Week* report, the growing proportion of women and ethnic minorities in the workforce has been typically problematised. A report on Workbase Training published by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, for example, notes that "*Ethnic minority recruitment, women returners* and the promotion of existing workers *are becoming a reality* for the workforce" (Taw, 1990:1,

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in Massachusetts—or the nation—can automatically depend on an unending stream of new workers with the right skills to match available jobs" (Sperazi, 1991:6). An Ontario (Canada) government-published guide to employers on setting up basic skills programs similarly asserted, "Employers will draw their labour supplies from a changing, diverse work force (greater numbers of women, immigrants who may not use English or French, and cultural minorities). There will be a greater need for literacy programs and other training" (Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, undated*b*:1).

emphases added). Implicit in the phrasing "are becoming a reality" is the assumption that this is not a positive trend, but something with which employers will have to cope. The problematizing is made explicit when the report goes on to claim that many in these groups "will require basic skills training in order to gain back confidence and competence" (ibid; see also Taw, 1991:352).

In fact, there is little basis in either England or North America for problematizing ethnicity and gender on the basis of either educational qualification or literacy deficit. In North America, women have for several decades possessed educational qualifications equal to or greater than men (Statistics Canada, undated; Rumberger, 1981). Among the less formally qualified, Livingstone reports of Ontario (Canada) that in the period since 1982 men have been slightly more likely to be deemed formally underqualified for their jobs (at 26 percent) as a result of credential inflation than have women at 20 percent. And visible minorities have been somewhat more likely to be overqualified (at 28 percent) than the general labour force at 20 percent (1996:80). The recent general 'literacy surveys' in both the United States and Canada have found no significant differences in the performance of male and female respondents. And, although social and economic disparity (and racial/ethnic discrimination) have been reflected in historically lower educational attainment for both blacks and Hispanics in the United States, the situation of both groups has improved steadily since the 1960s. Reading test score differences associated with racial/ethnic origin decrease as educational attainment increases (see, for example, Kirsch et al., 1993).

In England, although females' educational attainment has historically been lower than that of males, the situation has begun to change in recent years. Labour Force Surveys (1988-89) show that, while there were marginally more males than females between the ages of sixteen and nineteen in full-time education in 1982 (one percent), that figure had been turned around by 1988-90 and females represented a slight majority (reported in National Commission on Education, 1993:9). The same surveys showed that young adults from ethnic minority backgrounds (Afro Caribbean as well as South Asian) were much more likely to continue in full-time education after the age of 16 than were young whites (ibid). In terms of gender-based differences with respect to literacy and basic skills in England, Hamilton and Stasinopoulos report that, of the National Child Development Study cohort reporting literacy difficulties since leaving school, 12 percent were male and seven percent female. Equal numbers of men and women reported numeracy difficulties (1987:66).

Although neither women nor ethnic minority groups can be presumed to have inadequate educational qualifications (or literacy competencies), they are far more likely to occupy low level positions (for longer) and to have relatively poorer wages and benefits than their white male counterparts. Gowen (undated; 1992) suggests that this may provide some of the rationale for the generalized ascription of 'illiteracy' to women and ethnic minorities—and, in particular, to ethnic minority women. Her research on workplace literacy in the United States points to the very real possibility that the designation of some classes of workers as 'illiterate' may, in fact, serve as a justification for the low wages and poor conditions which

characterize much employment for both women and ethnic minorities. Describing one workplace literacy programme which she had studied, she noted that management "believed entry-level workers were illiterate because it was an acceptable way to explain why some employees, especially women, had been in the same jobs for a lifetime, doing the cooking, cleaning and washing that Black women have always done in the south" (undated:12). Within the explanation provided by the diagnosis of "illiteracy", she observed, "the problems of low wages and job ceilings lie not in the system but in the individual" (ibid).

WORKER 'ILLITERACY': A QUESTION OF COMPETENCY OR ATTITUDE?

A 1988 employer survey conducted by the New York based research firm, The Conference Board, asked employers to describe specific literacy skill deficits of their workers. Respondents identified six 'literacy' deficits of new hires. One of the deficits identified was reading, identified by 16 percent of employers as problematic; slightly more (17.2 percent) identified problems with attendance, dress, cooperation and related aspects of "work readiness" (B.T., 1991:64). Describing a workplace literacy programme in the southern United States, Gowen noted that management "used the term 'literacy' to define a whole set of behaviours outside the reading and writing of text" (undated:13-14). Though the behaviours, she observed, could be defined as management markers for 'appropriate', "by employing literacy as a cover term, the category was disguised as skills-based. For example, a supervisor in housekeeping ... described one of her employees as illiterate because the employee did not 'know to wear stockings to work with her uniform'" (ibid).

The conflation of attitudes and behaviours with 'literacy' and 'basic skills' is, in fact, a common feature of the workforce illiteracy discourse. The 'demographic' problem in the United States, for example, although presented as a problem of lower educational and skill qualification, is fundamentally a concern with habituation to the practices and values of the workplace. One of the problems envisaged by those who forecast a demographic 'time bomb' is that workers will have to be recruited from "disorganized" backgrounds and that "without intervention or a social miracle ... they may never be employable" (Erlich and Garland, 1988:114). The problematizing of women relates to what is seen to be an insufficient commitment to work because of the conflicting duties of family role(s): "A growing body of research links employees' concerns for the care of children or elderly relatives with productivity losses from increased absences, tardiness, and stress on the job—and such time wasters as excessive use of the phone" (ibid:108).

Increasingly, those who provide workplace literacy or basic skills refer to their programmes as 'training' programmes in an attempt to present them as comparable to technical, skills-based programmes. However, the language describing the nature of the problem being addressed and the description of workplace literacy programmes themselves betray an agenda which has little relation to what is commonly understood as workplace training. Changes in workers' attitudes are as likely to be cited as a primary benefit of workplace literacy programmes as improvements in skills. What many who promote such programmes promise is the facilitation of workplace 'cultural change': increased loyalty and improved morale are assured (see, for example, Taw, 1990). A workplace literacy organizer, for example, is

quoted in a national English newspaper report on employee basic skills programmes: "A seeming lack of interest in the job and a failure to take up opportunities are often just symptoms of difficulties with reading and writing" (Weston, 1991). In the same report, a London council's staff review was cited to support the need for workplace basic skills training. The review, a basic skills provider is quoted as saying, "showed that the workforce was almost entirely untrained and suffering from low morale which was seriously affecting the quality of service being offered" (ibid). In a similar vein, an English publicity pamphlet for workplace basic skills claimed that "a more literate and numerate workforce ... *shows a greater ability to work beyond basic requirements*"—implying, one may assume, a combined improvement in attitude and skill[27] (emphasis added).

One of the strongest—and, evidently, most persuasive—arguments put forward by those selling workplace basic skills programmes is that they can help facilitate the implementation of new management strategies. A conference of the project directors involved in the United States National Workplace Literacy Program, for example, situated the discussion of curriculum development entirely within the context of companies' adoption of 'continuous improvement' programmes. The conference report begins with a project director's statement: "We need (workplace literacy) programme initiatives that encourage innovation, risk-taking and reconceptualizing of 'literacy' and 'basic skills'" (U.S. Department of Education, 1992:6).

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[27] Workbase Training, *Implementing Training and Development for employees and supervisors*, publicity package, undated.

A report on workplace basic skills in England indicates an essential similarity in approach to that governing the U.S. national programme. "When a company has already trimmed its workforce to the minimum," the report observed, "the only way forward is to develop better working practices through greater worker involvement" (Taw, 1990:4). This—facilitating employee adjustment to new workplace 'realities'—is presented as a key function of workplace basic skills. The report's account of a celebrated workplace basic skills programme, for example, directly attributed operatives' changed attitudes towards management's institution of a quality control programme to their participation in the basic skills programme. Team briefings and quality circles, the report noted, "were not greeted with open arms by the operatives who ... felt the changes were being imposed on them and were a trick to get more work out of them" (ibid;2). An operative is quoted, after the initiation of a basic skills programme—as evidence of its success: "If wider training were given there would be more flexibility" (ibid). In fact, the company had agreed to support the basic skills programme, in part, as a means of getting shopfloor workers more involved in the new management strategy and the company's training programme, including the basic skills programme, had become "geared more closely to the work of the Continuous Improvement Teams" (Bootle and Rowley, 1992:6). A tutor's account of this same programme indicated that company innovations had made little change to the work of shop floor operatives—their work neither demanded, nor allowed, the exercise of reading and writing skills and, even technological innovations such as computerized stock control had not resulted in any change in the reading and writing content of

operatives' work (Nieduszynska, 1992:2). This would indicate that the company's primary (if not sole) motivation for supporting a basic skills programme for operatives was the attitudinal changes which the programme purported to facilitate.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented and critiqued the principal claims which have supported recent diagnoses of pervasive worker illiteracy in both North America and England. It has been argued that there is little evidence to support claims that a significant proportion of workers lack the literacy competencies to perform their jobs adequately. On the contrary, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that workers in general possess both literacy skills and formal educational qualifications beyond that required by their work and that, even among the least formally educated, there is little evidence of job-related literacy deficit. Indeed, recent North American 'literacy' surveys—though the principal 'empirical' evidence of the worker illiteracy problem—have suggested that work may itself contribute to the erosion of worker literacy competencies over time.

This chapter has concluded that the classification of particular sections of the working class as 'illiterate' serves to conceal fundamental race, ethnicity and gender biases within the workplace and the labour force. This is consistent, it is argued, with the historical uses of the apparently neutral social category, 'illiterate' for explicitly discriminatory purposes. The scapegoating of sections of the working class remains the primary function of the use of the ultimately manipulable 'literacy imperative'. The nature and impacts of that scapegoating form the central focus of the next chapter.

Part III

The Impacts on Workers

Chapter 6

The Impacts of Workplace Literacy Promotion on Workers: Opportunity or Threat?

INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter argued that the claims made by those who have campaigned to make an issue of worker illiteracy, as well as by those who have promoted the establishment of literacy or 'basic skills' programmes in workplaces, are not supported by the available evidence. On the contrary, workers in general—in both North America and England—possess literacy competencies equal to or beyond the requirements of their jobs, even when their educational levels (and/or their English language facility) are relatively low. It was further argued that workforce literacy campaigns and workplace literacy promotion mainly serve a scapegoating function—essentially blaming the most exploited workers for their poor pay and working conditions and the most disadvantaged in the labour market for their failure to obtain paid employment. This chapter examines more closely the scapegoating of workers in their workplaces as well as in the labour market.

The first section of the chapter examines the roles of capital and the state in workforce literacy campaigns and workplace literacy promotion. It is argued that both the campaigns to create an issue of worker illiteracy and the promotion of workplace literacy programmes are primarily a manifestation of the interplay between the state and factions of capital, as they have attempted to resolve the question of the devolution of responsibility for workforce preparation from the state

to the private sector. An understanding of the related (but frequently contradictory) goals of both the state and capital with respect to the workforce literacy issue is essential to an appreciation of the impacts of the pursuit of these goals on workers.

The second section of this chapter discusses the impacts (both probable and manifest, intended and unintended) of the general problematizing of sections of workers which has characterized workforce literacy campaigning and the promotion of workplace literacy programmes on both sides of the Atlantic. Clearly, there is scope for a variety of employer and state responses to widespread illiteracy among workers—whether imputed or real. Responses will be conditioned by the general political and economic environment, however. Employers' responses to the presumption of illiteracy among either their existing workforces or job applicants, for example, will reflect the price of labour as well as the degree of choice they may exercise in terms of the selection and retention/disposal of workers. These, in turn, will be influenced by the level of unemployment (either locally, regionally or nationally), the availability and level of benefits for the unemployed, the density and strength of worker organization, the general labour relations environment, and the degree of state regulation of employment practices. Public policy responses will reflect, among other factors, the general political and economic goals of governing parties as well as their particular approaches to labour force development.

Notwithstanding the scope for variable response (and the real potential for punitive responses on the part of employers), organized labour, educationalists, and (one must presume) those representatives of the state who have engaged in the

promotion of the issue have tended to take the optimistic view in the recent workforce literacy campaigns. Employers, it has been assumed, will either institute workplace programmes themselves or facilitate the establishment of programmes by other agencies, if workplace assessments reveal basic skills deficits and if they can be persuaded that worker illiteracy threatens profitability. It is argued here that such optimistic views are not warranted in the current period—if, indeed, they ever are. On the contrary, the political and economic context of recent campaigns to create an issue of worker illiteracy has shaped both employer and public policy responses in ways which have further disadvantaged less formally qualified workers both in the labour market and in their workplaces. In their efforts to promote their own services, educationalists, voluntary literacy organizations and labour organizations have all potentially jeopardized the job security of workers and have contributed to creating an environment in which workers are more likely to be subjected to unwarranted scrutiny and in which a range of punitive employer and public policy measures may appear to be reasonable and legitimate responses to alleged basic skills deficits.

Workforce Literacy Campaigns: The Roles of Capital and the State

Much of the discussion in the preceding three chapters has focused on the high degree of consensus achieved by the recent workforce literacy campaigns and the general unity among campaign participants—including, principally, representatives of capital, the state, organized labour and education. It would be incorrect, however, to present the campaigns as monolithic. Indeed, in some respects, quite

different—even contradictory—goals have been pursued. Chapter 4 examined the roles of both educationalists and organized labour in the campaigns and these will be further explored in later sections of this chapter, as well as in the next chapter, in the context of both the marketing and the establishment of workplace literacy programmes. This section briefly explores the roles of the state and sections of capital in the campaigns and examines the degree to which their objectives have either coincided or diverged.

State involvement in workforce literacy campaigns targets employers In the context of late twentieth century neo-liberal economic policies and what Shapiro (1985) has termed a general "shift in the distribution of the social product" from the working class to the employer and elite classes, the scope for public policy response to putative illiteracy among workers has been considerably narrowed. Whereas perceived skill shortages and worker undereducation were addressed through the establishment of a public infrastructure for the provision of academic upgrading and vocational training in both Canada and the United States in the 1960s, for example, claims of workforce academic and skill deficit in the 1980s coincided with the dismantling of a significant proportion of that public infrastructure and the privatization of much of that which remained (see Thomas, 1983; Reich, 1991; McBride and Shields, 1993; Heckman, Roselius and Smith, 1994; Peck and Rutherford, 1997). In both North America and England, the state has largely relinquished its role in labour force development planning over the last two decades in favour of a market-driven and largely employer controlled approach to skills training. While capital has generally endorsed the shift towards increasing

employer control of public labour force development funds, the reform of labour force development policy has not been without problems in either country. The lack of a central planning function and the failure of many sectors of business and industry to engage in training of any kind have given rise to widespread concerns about the long-term effects of national laissez-faire policies in the context of globally mobile capital (see, for example, Keep and Mayhew, 1988; Reich, 1992; Keep, 1993; Hansen, 1994; Layard, Mayhew and Owen, 1994).

In all three countries the state has responded, in part, by attempting to increase capital's commitment to an active training role. In this, they have been joined by some sections of capital, as well as by organized labour. The workforce literacy campaigns, and the specific promotion of workplace literacy programmes, have been one arena in which state lobbying of business and industry in pursuit of the goal of increased private sector support has constituted a driving force. The active promotion of business involvement in worker 'basic skills' programmes and, in North America, the tying of public spending on basic education for workers to an active employer role in that education has been one means by which capital's long-term support for the provision of work-based education and training has been pursued.

Capital's involvement in workforce literacy campaigns targets the state and other sections of capital Shapiro's analysis of the 1980s educational reform movement in the United States holds true for North American business involvement in literacy campaigning as well. As he notes (1985:60-62), capital did not present a unified front in its pursuit of educational reform but, on the contrary, was factionalized.

Whereas some sectors promoted a continuing commitment to the "socialization of capital's costs" through a strong state role in the production and reproduction of labour, others supported the neo-liberal policies of retrenchment pursued by the Reagan and Bush (and, in Canada, the Mulroney) administrations. These included, at base, the substantial diminution of the public sector and the concomitant expansion of the "prerogatives and resources of the private sector". The domain of education and training constituted one significant point of departure for capital's divergent factions. And, in both the United States and Canada, where the governments of the day pursued policies of reduced state intervention and control—particularly in respect of direct workforce training—the workforce literacy campaigns would become a field in which the differing agendas of the state and factions of capital became manifest.

In the United States the pages of the newsletter of the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL), over the ten years of its existence, documented the fundamental tension between the Republican administrations' objective of substantially diminishing the state's role in education and training (and, in particular, the role of the federal government) and the objectives of the factions of capital represented by the BCEL—primarily intermediate and larger corporate interests rooted in the national economy. Whereas the administrations of both Reagan and Bush sought to devolve responsibility for worker training from the state to employers, the interests represented by the BCEL sought enhanced federal and state government intervention in general adult education and training, including the

provision of language training for workers with limited English proficiency[1] (Chisman, 1989). They also sought increased state support for employer provided training (ibid). And they sought to align the objectives of publicly provided education more closely with the specific requirements of business and industry.[2]

These objectives were pursued through campaigning around the issues of educational reform and worker illiteracy, as well as through vigorous and direct political lobbying, particularly at the federal level. The lobbying effort, though ultimately less than successful, initially promised to achieve results. The doubling of federal funding for adult basic education over the period of the BCEL's existence and the 1991 establishment of a National Literacy Act, including the specific allocation of funds for a National Workplace Education Program, for example, were the direct result of lobbying led by these corporate interests.[3]

Corporate lobbying around the issue of workforce illiteracy has not been con-

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[1] A report on the federal role in adult literacy, initiated by the Business Council for Effective Literacy, concluded that basic skills development was "a classic public good, like elementary and secondary education, and many business leaders describe it in this way. They urge the public sector to live up to its responsibilities in this area" (Chisman, 1989:10-11).

[2] Closely associated with the workforce literacy campaigns was a business-led movement to have the state provide more directly job related training to the 'non-college bound' in their last years in school—in effect, to increase their skill levels without increasing their credentials and, thus, the price of their labour. A bill introduced by the California Governor in 1991, for example, based on the findings of the state's Workforce Literacy Task Force, introduced a statewide plan for the education and training of non-college-bound youth and adults (BCEL, No. 29, October 1991:6).

[3] Increases in state funding for the Adult Basic Education programme over the 1980s did not represent a strengthened commitment to public provision of the service, however. In fact, the privatization of the service was significantly furthered over the decade as the various funding allocations stipulated that educational institutions form "partnerships" with business or labour. The number of volunteers in the federal Adult Basic Education programme increased substantially over the decade as well (Beder, 1991). The National Literacy Act of 1991 did not result in significant new initiatives or appropriations of funds and, by 1993, both federal and state government commitment to adult literacy was in significant decline (BCEL, No. 36, July 1993). The National Workplace Education Program was actually eliminated in 1997 (Sticht, 1997).

fined to federal and state/provincial governments but has also extended to other sections of capital, as those corporations which initiated (or supported) the workforce literacy campaigns sought to forge a broad capitalist alliance in support of their objectives. Like the lobbying of governments, however, the lobbying of business and industry would prove to be only partially successful, as those sections of capital with more short-term interests (and little invested in workplace training) saw little to their advantage in the workforce literacy issue beyond its general ideological value as an indictment of the labour supply and a rationalization for many of the worst effects of capital's intensified quest for profitability in recessionary economic conditions.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the strategic targeting of worker illiteracy has served a number of functions for those industries and industry sectors directly involved in the campaigns. But, as this chapter discusses, it would also prove generally useful to the capitalist class as a whole to the extent that it succeeded in representing the specific training needs of business and industry—and, in particular, those needs arising from the restructuring of production processes and the reorganization of work—as matters of national interest (Smith, 1993). In the United States, in particular, employers have seen distinct possibilities in the workforce literacy issue for gains in state support for their in-house training activities and for renewed attempts to gain more discretionary power over many elements of the employment relationship. One specific goal of corporate workforce literacy campaigning, for example, was to secure tax credits for employer-provided 'basic skills' training (Speights, undated). Another—which will be elaborated further on in this chap-

ter—was to secure increased employer prerogative in the use of testing as a basis for employment decisions.

Most employers resist workplace literacy promotion As Chapter 5 described, the North American campaigns to create an issue of worker illiteracy initially achieved a considerable degree of success in raising 'awareness' about the issue, among the general public as well as among employers and employer groups. Surveys of employers conducted within a year or two of the launch of the national campaigns in both Canada and the United States revealed a marked increase in the numbers identifying illiteracy among workers in general as a problem. It would appear, however, that the responses to such surveys were to a large extent merely an expression of the employer's position on the 'worker question'—an opportunity to express a generalized dissatisfaction with the quality of the labour supply. The surveys were themselves intended to 'raise awareness' of the issue among the very employers they surveyed, and their results have to be interpreted in light of this. In general, Canadian and American employers, when presented with an open ended question about either the problems which their companies face or the quality of their workforce have not identified educational or literacy deficits.[4] When prompted, however, they have evidently been more willing to identify it as a general problem (DesLauriers, 1990; CBTFL, 1988a; Lee, 1988; Zemke, 1989).

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[4] The 1990 report of a commission on the skills of the American workforce, entitled *America's Choice: high skills or low wages!*, observed that while businesses everywhere "complained about the quality of their applicants, few talked about the kinds of skills acquired in school. The primary concern of more than 80 percent of employers was finding workers with a good work ethic and appropriate social behaviour: 'reliable', 'a good attitude', 'a pleasant appearance', 'a good personality' (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990: 3).

Similarly, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit's 1990 survey of employers in the United Kingdom found enough respondents (from human resource departments) agreeing to prompted questions about the impacts of basic skills deficits to support the thesis of a general workforce problem costing industry 4.8 billion pounds annually[5] (Kempa, 1993). This conclusion was in contrast to that of at least two other surveys which found that British employers were not significantly concerned with the issue of basic skills deficits (Atkinson and Papworth, 1991; Training Agency, 1989).[6]

As those who set out to market workplace literacy programming would find out, the general endorsement of a worker illiteracy problem as evidenced in some employer surveys was not reflected in the responses of employers to the suggestion of illiteracy in their own establishments. Employers have been almost universally less than enthusiastic about proclaiming their own workforces 'illiterate' and, in most cases, have proven to be unreceptive to the ground level workplace literacy promotion strategies of either state officials, educationalists, trades unionists or fellow capitalists. Some of the reasons for this are obvious. Executives interviewed for a 1989 Pennsylvania study on workplace literacy, for example, expressed the opinion that "the admission of having a serious literacy problem could negatively impact the image and reputation of the organization, both inter-

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[5] The English survey questionnaire was preceded by a note to respondents that their responses would be used to educate their local TEC and their local education authorities about "the demand for basic skills at work" (Gallup Poll Limited, undated).

[6] The Atkinson and Papworth study will be dealt with at greater length later in this chapter. The Training Agency's 1989 survey of employers found that a majority of firms surveyed "did not find any significant weakness in basic education that required extra training effort" (reported in Tuckett, 1991:17).

nally and externally" (Omega Group, 1989:17). Reports from a wide range of organizations involved in marketing workplace literacy programmes to employers attest to the general prevalence of such views. In Kingston (Canada), for example, a community literacy organization promoting workplace literacy with funding from the provincial government encountered considerable "local resistance to the need for literacy training in the workplace" (McIntyre, 1991:6). This 'local resistance' was manifested in "flat denial by some employers and business support groups of the possibility of literacy problems among the employed" as well as employer reluctance to consider investing either time or money in literacy training. Local business associations—including the district chamber of commerce and the area economic development commission—were, in fact, engaged in promoting the city for its *high* general level of workforce education (ibid, emphasis added). In another example of employer resistance, Calamai reported that a volunteer literacy organization, granted $1.2 million by the Canadian government to donate its services to employers at the very outset of the workforce literacy campaign, had "struggled to reach an initial target of 20 students" (1987:37). One recurring problem, he noted, was "a backlash by management and workers to the very word 'literacy'" (ibid).

It would appear that employers have been generally uninterested in supporting workplace basic skills programmes for reasons other than concerns about public image as well. The report of a study initiated by the U.S. Business Council for Effective Literacy (Chisman, 1989) noted that it was "highly unlikely" that businesses would develop in-house basic skills programmes and that there was good

reason for the fact that only a small fraction of corporate training money was spent on basic skills. Companies, the report noted, "will invest in the job-specific skills of their employees, but not in basic skills. This is because the payoff to any particular employer of an investment in basic skills is long term and those skills are highly portable ... Moreover, the turnover rate of low-level employees—those who are most likely to need basic skills instruction—is usually high" (1989:10-11). That the conclusions of the U.S. report are equally valid for Canada and England has been borne out by the evidence of the experience of those promoting workplace literacy in the two countries. After three years of trying to persuade employers to accept their services, a spokesperson for the above-referenced Canadian volunteer organization funded by the federal government to deliver workplace literacy programmes reported that "industry will not invest either money or much time in literacy training until it can clearly see ... the relationship between literacy and productivity as it affects the 'bottom line'" (Batdorf, 1991:343). In England, the director of one workplace basic skills initiative admitted that, although his organization had "invested a great deal of entrepreneurial effort in attempting to interest local employers" in workplace basic skills, their efforts had borne "very little fruit"; employers outside the public sector, he noted, appeared entirely uninterested in the proposition (Robb, 1992:55).

TARGETING EMPLOYERS, PROBLEMATIZING WORKERS

To a large extent, the North American workforce literacy campaigns and the promotion of workplace literacy programming on both sides of the Atlantic have been defined in reference to the generally acknowledged resistance of employers.

In North America, a narrow section of corporate interests has been joined by state representatives in their efforts to convince employers that, unless they take the initiative to identify and address worker illiteracy, the impacts on their businesses will be serious. Educationalists, voluntary literacy organizations, and organized labour have become 'partners' of the state and these corporate interests in the effort to get employers in general on side. In this effort, the workforce literacy campaigns have moved from the television screens, the business press, 'executive breakfasts' and national/state/provincial workplace literacy conferences to local chambers of commerce and boards of trade and, most importantly, to the workplace itself. In England, the state (represented by the Employment Department, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit and, in more recent years, by a number of Training and Enterprise Councils) has joined with both private and public education/training providers in the effort to demonstrate both the existence and the costs of workforce basic skills problems and to promote the establishment of remedial courses in the workplace.

In their enthusiasm for promoting the establishment of literacy programmes in workplaces, participants on both sides of the Atlantic have displayed a generally cavalier attitude to the potential negative impacts on the workers in question. Yet the potential for such impacts, as this section discusses, has been significant.

The state assumes a leadership role in the conversion of employers to the 'cause' of workplace literacy In all three countries, the state has taken a leadership role in the promotion of workplace literacy programming to (predominantly reluctant) employers. In North America, the province of Ontario and the state of Massachu-

setts illustrate the trend. Each has engaged in broad-based workplace literacy initiatives involving business and labour as well as educationalists and voluntary literacy organizations. In each case the state has taken the lead through publishing 'guides' intended to alert employers to the problem of workforce illiteracy as well as to assist them in identifying illiteracy among their own workforces and establishing literacy programmes in their workplaces.

The basic strategy for promoting employer support for workplace literacy programming, as evidenced in both Ontario and Massachusetts, has centred on the presentation of the existing workforce as a present or potential threat to company profitability. Ontario's 'guide' for employers, for example, claimed that the rate of 24 percent adult illiteracy—which the Southam Press 1987 national literacy survey had purportedly documented in that province—was reflected in the employed workforce (Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, undated). The publication equated worker 'illiteracy' with productivity losses and industrial accidents and warned that the situation would become worse as the literacy requirements of jobs (inevitably) increased and as greater numbers of women, ethnic minorities and immigrants joined the workforce.

The Massachusetts 'employer's guide' to planning adult basic skills programmes (Sperazi, 1991) advised employers "what to look for" when they were assessing their workplace education needs. Among the "typical indicators of need for a basic skills program" were listed: reluctance of workers to participate fully in new management strategies and employee involvement programs; the failure of workers to apply for job upgrades or to sign up for computer courses and other subjects;

errors in forms, checklists and a range of workplace written documents; more accidents than expected; and conflicts between ethnic groups that impact(ed) on production. Among the "hidden costs" of low worker literacy skills, the Massachusetts publication cited less efficient use of supplies and increased volume of scrap, more accidents and workers' compensation claims, and more sick time and staff turnover.

In England, workplace literacy promotion has utilized the same strategy. The 1990 survey commissioned by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, for example, asked employers to identify the effects of basic skills difficulties on their companies from a list which included lack of flexibility among workers; lack of efficiency/professionalism; loss of customers/business/lower quality of customer service; loss of profits/financial loss; and time wasting/not able to get on with the job (Kempa, 1993). The study also presumed to attach an actual (per-company) cost to each specific problem associated with basic skills difficulties.

Public funding and support for the marketing of workplace basic skills services

In addition to such direct interventions in workplace literacy promotion, state involvement has also included support for a range of agencies and organizations—both public and private—to market, develop and deliver workplace programmes. This has created a broad vested interest in the problematizing of workers' literacy competencies and the full range of agencies supported by the state to do so have actively engaged in the 'selling' of workplace literacy to employers.

The Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, for example, in addition to publishing the 'guide' to employers discussed above, has also funded voluntary literacy

organizations, public educational institutions, and labour organizations to develop their own strategies and materials for the marketing of their services to employers and employer organizations.

Kingston Literacy was one such organization operating with provincial government support. Like many other literacy organizations—as well as educationalists and trades unionists similarly supported with public funding on both sides of the North American border—the Kingston organization aggressively promoted the idea that employee literacy deficits were significant in most workplaces and that employers must, in their own interests, root out and address the problem (McIntyre, 1991:6). The organization had been advised by the provincial government's consultant for workplace literacy that the process of "courting" a business could take several months (ibid). As part of this 'courting' process—and in the face of the already noted resistance of local employers and business groups to the suggestion of literacy problems among the employed workforce—Kingston Literacy developed a project to "expose the myths about illiteracy" (ibid). Among the so called 'myths' which it attempted to expose were that "illiteracy is restricted to the unemployed"; that "illiteracy is confined to low skill occupations"; that "a high school graduate couldn't be illiterate"; and that "illiteracy is obvious" (McIntyre, 1991:Appendix D). These 'myths' were enumerated and formally presented to employers and employer groups, along with other myths (which were not identified, as such, however) which cited the effects of illiteracy in the workplace (the usual list—including productivity losses, absenteeism, and health and safety problems) and the benefits of instituting a workplace literacy programme (ibid).

Another Canadian voluntary agency, Frontier College, whose 'Learning in the Workplace' project has been funded by the federal government, offers employers a "quick self-assessment questionnaire", noting that if they have problems in any of the areas listed, they may have a literacy problem (Ioannou, et al, 1991:133-34). The list includes paperwork that has to be rechecked, resistance to new management approaches, failure of employees to participate in in-house projects such as employee involvement programmes, a high rate of industrial accidents, excessive waste, low productivity, and delays in the implementation of new technology.

In England, a 'practitioner's guide' to setting up workplace basic skills programmes—published in 1990 by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit and Workbase Training for the use of educationalists engaged in direct marketing to employers—identified a number of "shopfloor problems" stemming from basic skills difficulties (Rees, 1990:9). These included: "time-consuming mistakes...; [a] high level of supervisor intervention to compensate lack of staff self-reliance; insufficient flexibility in work arrangements; inaccurate completion of records; and failure to take up promotion opportunities". Workbase Training has included in one of its own promotional kits a colourful chart, graphically presenting a similar list of "shop floor problems" (Workbase Training, undated).

As noted, in North America trades unions and labour federations have been among those supported by the state to develop and deliver workplace literacy programmes. Like the other agencies and organizations funded to do so, the representatives of organized labour have participated in 'selling' employers on the need for workplace literacy. This has meant that workers' representatives have

themselves engaged in the problematizing of worker basic skills competencies. In 1987, for example, Thomas Donahue, then Secretary Treasurer of the American labour federation AFL-CIO, stated: "We've recognized that the days when strong hands were enough are gone ... We've discovered the frequency of the disguised illiteracy among men and women who've been in the workforce a number of years, have masked their insufficiency in one way or another, and now have to acquire those skills" (quoted in BCEL, No. 13, October 1987:4).

Two examples from the Canadian province of Ontario (where both provincial and federal government funding has supported unions as programme deliverers) serve to illustrate the general similarity between the strategies of unions engaged in the promotion of workplace literacy and those of other organizations. In both examples, the unions involved were participating in a workplace literacy initiative organized, with public funding, by the provincial federation of labour. In the model established by the labour federation, unions 'recruit' workers to participate in a workplace programme taught by a fellow worker acting in a volunteer capacity. They then negotiate with the employer for time off for both the workers/students and the worker/teacher to participate in the programme—typically half of the programme time, or two hours per week. Public funding for the programme is based on the number of 'contact hours' and so depends on the numbers of workers recruited (Thomas, 1989:43). This has meant that unions in Ontario, as much as any other agency, have had a vested interest in recruiting as many workers to their programmes as possible. In fact, the Ontario Labour Federation actually established quotas for each regional coordinator of the

workplace literacy initiative for both literacy and English/French as a Second Language programmes in the workplace. These quotas—16 and 8 programmes respectively in the first year—were raised in the second year when each regional coordinator was expected to establish 20 literacy and ten language programmes (Ontario Federation of Labour, undated:9).

In the first example, described in a report on workplace literacy by the Conference Board of Canada (1992), the union involved, the United Steelworkers of America, represented workers at a major nickel and copper smelting operation. In the discussions around instituting a union-run basic skills programme, the company and the union disagreed on the extent of worker basic skills difficulties. Management trainers reported that "most affected workers (had) been successful in training for the new smelter furnace environment and (had) adapted quickly to the computer controlled systems technology" (1992, Appendix vi:3). The Conference Board report noted that the company perceived "no operational imperative which requir[ed] an immediate, systematic response to the basic skills problem" (ibid). The union questioned the company's view that basic skills deficits did not have a significant negative impact on company profitability. Union representatives, the report noted, "cited a number of instances where continuous improvement project teams had run into problems caused by training and skills deficits" (ibid:4). The union also argued that the workers who had come forward and admitted to basic skills difficulties in response to their recruitment drive represented only the "tip of the iceberg". There was, they asserted, a "substantially greater ... hidden

population" who had not come forward "because of the stigma attached to illiteracy" (ibid:3).

In the second example, described in *Canadian Business* magazine, another major Canadian union, the Canadian Auto Workers, along with a representative of the Ontario Federation of Labour, set out to persuade a telecommunications company that many of its factory workers needed "help with reading and writing to keep up with their changing jobs" (Allan, 1991:70). Management, the article noted, was surprised: "How could they have a literacy problem when they had been hiring at the Grade 12 level since the early 1970s?" The labour representatives evidently were successful in persuading the employer, however. For, as the article observed, management—after it had "heard out" the union and "listened to the pitch" from the federation of labour—realized that "once-competent assembly-line workers could no longer keep up with the information they needed to do their jobs" (ibid).

PROBLEMATIZING WORKER BASIC SKILLS COMPETENCIES GENERAL IMPACTS

The Context: Employment Insecurity and Increasing Marginalization of the Less Formally Qualified

The problematizing of workers' literacy/basic skills competencies described here has taken place in the context of increasing employment insecurity in both North America and England. The principal economic/industrial trends in this period have tended towards the displacement of labour. These have included the migration of manufacturing industries to other countries and regions, typically in search of increased profits through lower wages and reduced regulation, and the adoption by employers in both the private and the public sectors of labour

displacing technologies as well as a variety of restructuring/reorganization strategies—including, for example, 'lean production' regimes and 'continuous quality improvement' processes. The majority of workplace reorganization strategies have been accompanied by significant job shedding (see Fairbrother, 1991; Gordon, 1996a). And workers who are retained in the 'reorganized' workplaces are typically faced with both intensified and enlarged jobs (Elger, 1991). Substantial diminution of the public sector in all three countries has had similar impacts on the workers retained. The privatization process itself is frequently characterized by an intensification of labour and increased 'task flexibility' for workers as they are pressured to demonstrate 'efficiency' and, in some instances, to compete with the private sector for their own jobs.[7]

Continuing high levels of unemployment in Canada and England, and periodic sharp rises in unemployment in the United States have resulted in the permanent removal from the active labour force of a significant proportion of those displaced from work over the past two decades. Many others have succeeded in retaining only the most tenuous connection to paid work—typically in temporary and part-time jobs with the minimum legislated conditions and benefits of employment (Schachter, 1995; Hughes, 1996). The 'filtering down' of workers with more formal qualifications has meant that those with fewer qualifications are dispropor-

[7] Compulsory Competitive Tendering, a privatization strategy of Conservative governments in 1980s and 1990s England, provides one example of this. Local councils have been required to put a range of services out to competitive tender; council employees have been obliged to compete with private contractors for their own jobs. Compulsory Competitive Tendering has been cited in several workplace basic skills documents as likely to expose basic skill deficiencies (see, for example, Rees, 1990:52-53). Among the services offered to affected workers by basic skills agencies are "job-finding strategies" for those who lose their jobs as a result of the policy (ibid).

tionately represented among both the unemployed and the underemployed (Atkinson, 1992; Kirsch et al., 1992; Statistics Canada et al., 1995). And, as Chapter 4 discussed, the relative decline of employment in manufacturing sectors in all three countries has had an especially pronounced impact on workers with less formal qualifications.

Both the province of Ontario and the state of Massachusetts undertook the promotion of employer involvement in workplace literacy programmes in the context of extensive deindustrialization and the displacement of large sections of their least formally educated workers. In Ontario, massive manufacturing plant closures followed the establishment of the Canada/U.S. Free Trade Agreement in 1989 (McBride and Shields, 1993) and the relocation of Canadian plants—or the substantial outsourcing of production—to the United States.[8] In Massachusetts, deindustrialization had begun in the early 1980s as manufacturing industries moved from the Northern states to less unionized (and generally less educated) regions of the country, as well as offshore. Sondra Stein, one of three state representatives responsible for shaping the Massachusetts workplace education initiative, reported that "fully 46 percent [of those] who had lost their jobs through Massachusetts plant closings in the early 80s had not completed high school and had insufficient basic skills to qualify for employment or for vocational training that would lead to a job where they could earn wages comparable to those at the job they had lost" (undated:6). In fact, the impact of the loss of manufacturing jobs on wages has

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[8] *Canadian Business* magazine reported that 300,000 manufacturing jobs were lost in Canada from 1990 to 1993 and that the hardest hit had been "male manufacturing workers in Ontario, aged 25-44, with a primary school or lower level of education" (Schachter, 1995:31).

related more to the net loss of unionized jobs than to education/skill deficits. Yet, as in Ontario, the Massachusetts workplace literacy initiative depended for its success on persuading employers that their less educated workers threatened company profitability.

Indeed, trades unions' problematizing of worker basic skills has also taken place at times when employers may well be seeking just such information for purposes of selection and deselection. In the first Ontario example cited above, for example, the United Steelworkers' efforts to persuade the employer that basic skills deficiencies were very widespread took place in the context of significant job shedding and the institution of new production processes and new management regimes. Over the preceding decade, the bargaining unit had been reduced by half (Conference Board of Canada, 1992, Appendix vi:2). In another Canadian example, sawmill workers in British Columbia became the subjects of a literacy assessment endorsed by their union, the International Woodworkers Association Canada, even though mills were at the time facing "seasonal and market curtailments" (Goetz et al, 1991:3). A report on the literacy assessment noted that "it was difficult to convince employees that results would be kept confidential at a time when jobs were perceived to be at risk" (ibid).

In a similar case from England, employees at a heating engineering company in the North West initially reacted to their shop stewards' promotion of a workplace literacy programme with deep suspicion. The employer was in the process of instituting massive change in work organization and job losses were anticipated. Many employees felt the programme being proposed was a ploy by management to

get them to buy into the changes; but they also feared that admitting to basic skills deficits would only give the employer a rationale for laying them off in the coming 'downsizing'. In spite of these concerns—and the undoubted potential for the workers' fears to be realized—shop stewards persisted in their promotion of the programme and several workers were eventually persuaded to enrol.[9]

Workplace Literacy Promotion Reinforces the Marginalization of the Less Formally Qualified The problematizing of worker literacy competencies has also taken place in the context of heightened 'credential inflation', as increasing numbers have continued into postsecondary education on both sides of the Atlantic and generally high rates of unemployment have allowed employers to increase entry requirements and recruit more formally qualified workers without additional cost (Brown, 1994; Livingstone, 1996; Gordon, 1996b). Indeed, recent years in North America have seen the complete devaluation of anything less than a post-secondary diploma or degree. A report on the displacement of blue-collar workers in Canada, for example, characterized a displaced worker "with only a Grade 12 education" as having "little more to offer an employer than his brute strength" (Schachter, 1995:32). This devaluation has been reflected in a precipitous decline in wages for high school graduates over the past two decades (Rumberger, 1981, 1984; Judis, 1994; Gordon, 1996b).

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[9] When the layoffs came and programme participants were among those who lost their jobs, many were convinced that their participation in the programme had led to their being singled out. Assurance by both the unions and the employer that the proportion of programme participants laid off was no greater than the proportion of layoffs in general did not entirely allay suspicions. The fact that the redundancies were based on "attitudes and commitment to team working" rather than seniority contributed to increased insecurity about admitting personal deficits (from shop stewards and management presentation at Baxi Heating, Preston, June 10, 1992).

In North America the educational reform movement and the 1980s adult literacy campaigns have both directly challenged the validity of high school graduation credentials and promoted the use of a range of direct assessments, thus exacerbating the situation for the less formally qualified (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Kirsch et al., 1992; Statistics Canada et al., 1995). The use of standardized testing for the purpose of 'deselection' has proliferated in the public educational systems at all levels as well as at the workplace, making it increasingly unlikely that those with literacy difficulties will attain either educational credentials or employment. In the mid-1980s, for example, the U.S. Employment Service in the majority of states tied its job placement service entirely to the administration of a strictly timed general 'aptitude' test.[10] As a report by the National Academy of Sciences observed, getting a job through the Employment Service depended on doing well on the test (Hartigan and Wigdor, 1989). Indeed, the hugely increased use of testing as the basis for a range of employment decisions has not been confined to North America. A 1994 newspaper report on the use of testing by firms in England, for example, noted that a recent study had found that 85 percent of organisations use tests at some time (Strickland, 1994). An example is given of a privatized utility which selected 900 candidates for redundancy (of a total workforce of 2,700) through a 'personality' questionnaire. In other cases corporate

[10] The General Aptitude Test Battery, developed in the 1940s, was being used by the Employment Service in 33 states in 1990. Its use was banned in that same year following a report by the National Academy of Sciences (Martin, 1990:34). The General Aptitude Test Battery is purported to be a valid predictor for all 12,000 jobs in the U.S. economy, "based on the idea that the test measures some attribute that underlies performance in all jobs, an attribute that is usually identified as intelligence" (Hartigan and Wigdor, 1989:3).

'downsizing' in that country has utilized academic testing as the basis for the selection/deselection of workers.[11]

In such a climate, the likelihood of an applicant with any degree of literacy (or language) difficulty being hired (or retained) is remote—except where such competencies are not an issue for the employer. In spite of this, however, the marketing of workplace literacy programmes in both North America and England has centred on the generalized problematizing of workers with relatively less formal qualifications. In many cases, the identification of the problematized workers (low qualifications, low skills, low wages, low English proficiency) is explicit, though lip service is typically paid to the notion that 'illiteracy' is class (and classification) neutral. For example, although (Canada's) Frontier College's Learning in the Workplace project claims that it is "open to all", its 'Organizational Needs Assessment' specifically identifies "at-risk" populations in the workplace—those with less than a high school graduation, those whose first language is not English or *who speak other than a standard dialect of English*, and those whose jobs are changing rapidly (Ioannou, et al, 1991:138, emphasis added). In the context of the promotion of the programme to employers, of course, what these groups are purported to be 'at-risk' of is threatening workplace safety and company profitability, among other things. Similarly, a Canadian educationalist from the public college system, in describing her experience of promoting workplace literacy programmes in western Canada, observed, "Most employers have never considered the possibility

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[11] Another privatized utility, Northwest Water, contracted with a local further education college to deliver short courses and test employees. Those who performed adequately on the tests were retained in the restructured company; those who did not lost their jobs (information gathered in visit to course and testing facility, June 1992).

that *under-skilled or undereducated* employees are costing them money" (Wellborn, 1990:6, emphasis added). And, in England, although Workbase Training has in recent years promoted itself as serving the training needs of "supervisors and employees", its promotional materials frequently refer to the greater need among those in manual and low paid work. Workbase research is cited in the above referenced 'practitioner's guide' to workplace basic skills, for example, to support the claim that "up to 30% of low paid workers need basic skills training", a figure which "rises to almost 80% in some inner city areas"—due, we may probably assume, to the higher concentrations of ethnic minority workers in those areas (Rees, 1990:8).

Proponents of workplace literacy programmes have indirectly lent support to the generalized raising of hiring criteria through such dubious 'evidence'. But in many cases they have also actively and directly promoted increasing credentialism and the use of direct assessment to establish the competencies of job applicants. The Ontario publication referred to above (Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, undated), for example, advised employers to review their hiring, promotion and other human resource practices to ensure that they clearly specified pre-requisite skills. It also advised them not to take the literacy skills of their workers for granted, but to search for evidence of illiteracy. It suggested, for example, looking at samples of forms which workers had filled in for evidence of errors or for evidence that they might be completing forms for each other. And the national employer survey conducted by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit in England strongly emphasised the potential losses to firms which neglected to screen job

applicants for literacy competence. The report on the survey stated that the "relatively large proportion of companies not testing specific skills, especially at blue collar level, could lead to the recruitment of staff inadequately skilled in reading, writing, numeracy and verbal communications" (Kempa, 1993:25).

Although the problematizing of worker basic skills, in the context of the promotion of workplace literacy programmes, has generally targeted less formally qualified sections of workforces, it should be noted that in North America the critique has not been confined to those with less than high school graduation. Employers are also regularly exhorted to examine the competencies of workers whose educational credentials may meet the company specification (see, for example, Ioannou, et al, 1991). And, far from challenging the use of increasing credentialism by employers, it would appear that trades unions have frequently been willing participants in the process as well. In Saskatchewan (Canada), for example, though the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool had already recently established Grade 12 as the minimum qualification for all new entry positions and promotions, the provincial Federation of Labour embarked on an initiative to assess the cooperative's workers' basic skill competencies and to promote workplace literacy programmes (Barclay, 1990:11). The promotion of the programme to the employer, it may be assumed, relied largely on problematizing those workers who had become formally 'underqualified'—those who, though still employed, no longer met the entry level requirements. Similarly, the evidence from Ontario, as described in the discussion on page 279, indicates that in the promotion of their union-led basic

skills programmes, Ontario unions targeted workplaces where Grade 12 had been the minimum entry-level requirement for many years.

Workplace literacy campaigns and the extension of employer prerogative: the example of the United States In the United States, the widespread public acceptance and official endorsement of the 'fact' of worker illiteracy have lent support to recent challenges to labour legislation perceived as constraining employer prerogative with respect to a range of employment decisions including hiring, promotion and demotion, mandating training, and so forth. In 1988, the newsletter of the Business Council for Effective Literacy featured an item entitled "Employers and the *Law of Literacy*" (BCEL, No. 17, October 1988:6-7, emphasis added). The article noted that it was responding to queries which it had received from companies about "employee basic skills testing and training." At issue were three questions, the first of which asked: "Under what circumstances may employers test basic skill levels of job applicants and current employees, and what restrictions, if any, apply to the form such testing may take?"

As BCEL's response to the 'query' indicated, federal legislation in the United States does place restrictions on employers' use of testing to influence any employment decision. The pertinent legislation, which was first enacted as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibits the use of such testing by employers if it results in discrimination—irrespective of whether the employer intends to discriminate or not (ibid; Philippi, 1993). All tests which may be used to influence a decision about hiring, promotion, demotion, and so forth, must be 'validated' for job relatedness. This means that the employer must be able to demonstrate a high

correlation between successful test performance and successful job performance. Further, unless job progression is likely within a "reasonable period of time", employees can only be tested at or near the entry level for the position (BCEL, No. 17, October 1988:6).

That the question of testing is a central issue for both employers and workers is evidenced in both the enactment of this law and its contestation by capital. The 1964 legislation was, in fact, significantly undermined in a Supreme Court decision of 1989 which shifted the burden of "proving discriminatory hiring practices from the employer to the applicant" (Martin, 1990:32). And, although Civil Rights legislation in 1991 restored the original intent of the 1964 Act (Philippi, 1993), activities associated with the workforce literacy campaigns and workplace literacy programming have presented employers with both a justification and a process (the literacy task analysis) for the broadening of 'job relatedness'. Through these means, it promised to make a wider range of tests legally defensible. Thomas Sticht, the internationally renowned workplace literacy 'expert', advised American employers that, while general literacy tests would likely fail to meet the legal requirements imposed by Title VII, tests based on specific literacy analysis of the job could be shown to have 'content validity' and, thus, be defended in the courts if necessary[12] (quoted in BCEL, No. 22, January 1990:6).

Because Title VII also prohibits the use by the employer of educational requirements not warranted by the duties and responsibilities of the job, it is clear that employers have an interest in defining literacy (and, thus, educational) requirements

[12] In fact, a 1987 report on industry-based training programmes in the U.S. noted that courts then allowed reading tests (of employees) based on a job task analysis (Fields et al, 1987:26).

of jobs as broadly as possible. Courts, the BCEL article (October 1988:6-7) noted, "had often overturned high-school-diploma requirements for production, maintenance, and apprenticeship positions where the result is discriminatory. Lower and more specifically defined education level requirements have been approved for such relatively low-skilled jobs". Again, because the literacy task analysis process typically ascribes literacy content to virtually all jobs—including, as the next chapter discusses, those where workers themselves claim no reading and writing is required—its potential for the rationalization of inflated job qualification requirements is clear.

The other two employer 'queries' to which the BCEL responded in its "Employers and the Law of Literacy" article related to the use of mandatory training for those deemed to be deficient in basic skills (ibid). "Under what circumstances", it was asked, "may employers make participation in basic skills training programs mandatory for job applicants and current employees?" A further question asked, "Can employers require employees to enrol in basic skills programs on their own time—i.e. outside of regular working hours? And, are employers obliged to pay for the training?".

Again, U.S. federal legislation, contained in the Fair Labor Standards Act, imposes a number of constraints on the employer's use of training—suggesting, as Title VII does, the need for protection of workers. For example, where workers are required by the employer to participate in training programmes outside of working hours, they must not only be paid for the training but (unless they belong

to a class of exempted workers[13]) they must be paid overtime wages. In fact, the legislation obliges employers to pay workers for participation in directly job-related training outside of working hours, whether participation is voluntary or mandatory—and participation is not considered voluntary if employees are "given to understand or led to believe" that their present working conditions or continuing employment may be adversely affected (ibid).

The Business Council for Effective Literacy called for a review of "current regulations and Wage and Hour provisions" under the Fair Labor Standards Act, "in light of new understandings about present worker skill levels and the changing requirements of jobs" (ibid). The review evidently took place for, as the BCEL newsletter would report in July 1992, a December 1991 ruling on the Wage and Hour provisions made an exception to the provisions for less formally educated workers. As the report noted, "employers can require workers who lack a high school diploma or who read below 8th-grade level [presumably, even if they have a high school diploma (S.H.)] to participate in basic skills training outside of work hours *without paying them at the usual overtime rate*" (BCEL, No. 32, July 1992:4, emphasis added). Under the provisions of the rule, workers may now be required to spend as much as 10 hours a week over their regular 40-hour week in reading or other basic skills instruction with no entitlement to overtime pay. The legislation foresaw the possible abuse by employers of the overtime exemption and, in an effort to prevent it, stipulated that discrete time periods must be set aside for the

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[13] Categories of workers exempted from the overtime provisions under this legislation include professional, executive, retail and transportation workers, for example (BCEL, No. 17, October 1988:7).

training; that the training should, if possible, not take place at the worker's usual work station; and that it must not be job specific (ibid). In fact, the mandatory imposition of training outside of regular working hours would likely entail even more hardship than the foregoing of overtime pay, since many American workers are obliged to take second jobs to supplement their generally low (and falling) wages; many others would incur new or additional child care costs as a result of the mandatory training. Both of these barriers are commonly cited in reports on voluntary (compensated and uncompensated) workplace literacy programmes which take place outside of regular working hours as reasons for many workers not participating (see, for example, Sperazi, 1991; Turk and Unda, 1991).

Increased scrutiny of workers It is clear from the U.S. example that both testing and workplace training represent an aspect of the labour/capital relationship which is (at least potentially) as fundamentally conflictual as any other aspect of that relationship. A 1990 article in the newsletter of the Business Council for Effective Literacy noted that "as standardized tests have come into sweeping use throughout ... employment, so have complaints about them and challenges to their validity. They have been the subject of congressional hearings and state legislatures, and are increasingly the subject of lawsuits in state and federal courts" (BCEL, January 1990:1). Though no such official or legal controversy has accompanied the growing use of workplace testing in either Canada or England, this is probably attributable to a range of factors other than workers' perceptions and reactions to such assessments—including, for example, the prominence of litigation as an institutional mechanism for effecting change in the American system (Martin,

1990). With respect to 'basic skills' assessments, it may also reflect the greater extent of employer imposed basic skills testing in the United States in the wake of the national workforce literacy campaigns; or it may also reflect the fact that, in both Canada and England, a greater proportion of workplace assessments has either involved unions or has been sanctioned by unions. For, although unions are generally no less supportive of basic skills assessments and programmes in the United States, the density of unionization is much lower in that country than in either Canada or England and the majority of workplace literacy activity takes place in non-unionized workplaces. One report on the U.S. National Workplace Literacy Program, for example, suggests that up to 70 percent of projects operating under the programme may have no union involvement (Schultz, 1992).

There is substantial evidence in the reports on workplace literacy promotion that the threat which workers are exposed to (or which they perceive) from the use of 'basic skills' assessments as well as from participation in programmes is a function of the labour/capital relationship in general, irrespective of geography. The above-cited example of workers at the North West England heating plant provides clear evidence that not only the basic skills assessment but participation in the pro-gramme itself caused participants to feel threatened. And, in the example of the Canadian sawmill survey, also cited above, many workers could not be persuaded that participation in a basic skills assessment was safe (and would not agree to participate) even though the assessment project had been organized by a joint union-management committee and was presented as simply an effort to improve workplace communications. A report on the project by a company human

resources manager noted that the committee had "realized the deep sensitivity of workers whose personal competency was being examined" (Hawrysh, 1991:212).

That the threat posed by such assessments—as well as by participation in workplace basic skills programmes—is real is evidenced in the responses of employers to questions on the issue. U.S. executives surveyed in 1989, for example, reported that they would not expect workers to come forward for basic skills assessment or programmes for a number of reasons (Omega Group, 1989:17). One respondent cited the very real likelihood that any workers who did so "would be stigmatized by the organization ... and [their] progress within the company would suffer, both in terms of promotions and salary increases". Another stated that a worker who "comes forward with a literacy problem and is unable to successfully complete the program would be publicly known to have failed, and other job capabilities and his future potential would be questioned". Executives in the Omega Group survey also expressed the view that workers "would actually consider the program to be a ploy to expose those who, because of illiteracy, were a detriment to the organization, and should be weeded out." And, as one respondent observed, this is an entirely rational fear: "Once you get into a company, I think the admission [of a literacy problem] has a lot to do with what happens to you. [T]here are some bosses that if a person admits that they can't do something are quite punitive." The overall conclusion of the executives surveyed was that they did not believe that workers could (or would) "see a clear and certain payoff for acknowledging a literacy problem."

From quite a different source—a 'community-based educator' engaged in developing educational programmes for private industry in Los Angeles—serious reservations are expressed about the very programmes he is involved in: "I am concerned that workplace literacy programs will be used to admit a few and eliminate many. Managers will use testing for high-tech positions to justify getting rid of employees with low reading skills, and those who do qualify will have to perform additional tasks. Worst of all, more demanding communications skills criteria will be used to discriminate against those who have an accent" (Anorve, date:40). He goes on to quote a participant in one of his workplace programmes: "Look at my hands! See them? These hands have contributed to the wealth of this company, and not once in twenty years have I had to read English, nor have I had to speak it in order to do my work. Now they're telling me that I need to read English in order to do the same work and compete with another worker?" (ibid).

The intensive promotion of the increased scrutiny of literacy competencies in employment screening processes, as well as of direct 'literacy' assessments of workers, which has accompanied the promotion of workplace literacy programming in both North America and England fundamentally threaten workers. And, to judge from the evidence of recent surveys, employers need no such encouragement. In terms of initial screening of applicants, for example, a 1992 study sponsored by the Conference Board of Canada reported that "40 percent of the surveyed employers carry out pre-employment testing to screen applicants for basic skills. Those companies report screening out an average of 15 percent of job applicants because of inadequate literacy and numeracy levels" (Conference Board of Canada, 1992:8).

Similarly, in England, nearly half of all respondents in the 1990 employer survey commissioned by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit indicated that they assessed reading skills of blue collar applicants; 63 percent tested writing skills (which, of course, assume reading competency) and 79 percent tested oral communications skills (Kempa, 1993:25).

In the United States, in spite of the legal protection theoretically provided by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the screening of applicants is frequently extreme. The Business Council for Effective Literacy reported, for example, that in 1987 New York Telephone "had to process 57,000 applicants to find 2,000 qualified entry-level workers" (BCEL, No. 15, April 88:4). Ironically, the case was cited as evidence of the difficulty companies have recruiting entry-level workers; what it serves to illustrate is, of course, the opposite.[14] And both cases underline the fact that 'assessment' in the hands of employers is an issue with very high stakes for workers.

A 1989 article in the U.S. *Management World*, entitled 'Combatting Illiteracy in the Workplace', addressed the issue of how employers could use screening to identify worker basic skills deficiencies (and so avoid hiring them) while also avoiding litigation (Goddard, 1989:9). The article advised employers to begin by

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[14] Sticht (1992) cites a report from the Los Angeles Times (February 20, 1991) which indicates that such corporate 'evidence' was being met with some scepticism. The report noted that the chairman of a major telecommunications company had complained that more than half of the 6,400 applicants tested for the job of 'operator' had failed a 7th grade level reading test administered by the company. He had cited this as evidence of business' need for improved public education in order to ensure "workers with skills that will allow us to be competitive into the next century." But, as the newspaper report noted, "What he didn't say was that for the 2,700 who passed the test there were only 700 job openings, paying poverty-level wages ...". "In truth", the reporter stated, "the schools now provide PacTel with nearly four times the number of qualified operator-candidates it needs" (1992:2).

including in job descriptions the type and level of reading, writing and calculation responsibilities and by specifying "the types of manuals and technical literature, the type of reports and letters written, [and] the type of speaking assignments required." As the evidence presented in Chapter 5 (as well as in the next chapter) demonstrates, one effect of the promotion of workplace literacy programming has been the exaggeration of the 'literacy' demands of all jobs. An employer wishing to add a list of technical manuals and written instructions to a job (and, thus, raise the job qualifications in a legally defensible way) would find wide support for doing so from the workplace literacy lobby. The *Management World* article also advised employers to observe applicants' literacy competency directly as a part of the screening process—for example, through insisting that they complete employment forms in the office (even during the interview) and through having all applicants read the conditions of employment and indicate comprehension before signing (ibid).

With respect to the use of direct literacy/basic skills assessments of the present workforce, the workforce literacy campaigns have evidently had an especially significant impact in the United States where, although legislation provides some protection for workers, it would appear that employers are particularly vigilant in the search for 'legal' opportunities to conduct workplace testing. The above-cited *Management World* article, for example, observed that, although literacy testing of groups had been challenged by equal opportunities and affirmative action authorities as unfair and discriminatory, "it is perfectly legitimate if administered to individuals who have exhibited literacy deficiencies that affect job performance and

it is used to determine the degree of deficiency and the type of training needed" (ibid). The article recommended that department managers be charged with determining "job-related literacy problems" in their work units and with highlighting these deficiencies in performance appraisals and management reports. Having documented a deficiency, of course, they could then proceed with legally defensible testing.

Indeed, it would appear that American companies began to do just that in response to the workforce literacy campaigns. A survey of basic skills testing by the American Management Association reported that in 1989, two years after the national launch of the campaign to 'raise awareness' about worker illiteracy, testing of the basic skills of employees had doubled; one year later (in 1990) it had doubled again and it rose a further 35 percent in 1991 (Greenberg, 1992:8). Whereas, in 1989, five percent of surveyed companies utilized literacy testing and mathematics testing, in 1992 the percentage had risen to 22.3 percent utilizing literacy testing and 27.3 percent using mathematics testing. Employers were also using basic skills testing as a basis for employment decisions. In 1990, at the peak of workforce literacy campaigning, six percent of the survey companies reported dismissing employees deemed to be "skills deficient".[15] A further 11.5 percent responded by reassigning workers. And ten percent made training mandatory for those who exhibited basic skills deficiencies.

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[15] The sharp rise in punitive response to basic skills testing was evidently short-lived, however. The percentage of employers dismissing basic skills deficient workers had declined to 4 percent in 1991 and 2 percent in 1992 (Greenberg, 1992:8). One might speculate as to its relationship to either the peak of workplace literacy campaigning activity (in 1990) or to the fact that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was in this period significantly weakened by the 1989 Supreme Court ruling (Martin, 1990).

The increased use of testing has not been confined to individual assessments by firms. In many cases 'basic skills assessments' have been conducted on an industry-wide and institution-wide basis, as the above example of the assessment of workers in British Columbia (Canada) sawmills illustrates. Not all such assessments have been 'information gathering' exercises such as the B.C. sawmills survey purported to be, however. The Business Council for Effective Literacy reported the results of a company-wide assessment at Eastman Kodak, for example, where some 10,000 employees had been found to lack "the basic skills needed to implement the organizational and technological changes required to make the company more competitive" (BCEL, No. 15, April 1988:4). And a General Motors official was quoted in a report by a policy board of the southern U.S. states as saying, "It was an awful shock when we assessed the workforce in one of our plants and found that 87 percent of our employees were incapable of doing work beyond the fifth grade" (Rosenfeld, 1987:1).

Nor have broad assessment of employees been confined to the private sector. The U.S. Postal Service, for example, announced in 1991 that it was beginning to examine the basic skills and language needs of its 760,000 strong workforce and to offer "some experimental programs" for them (BCEL, No. 26, January 1991:5). And Milwaukee Public Library, with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, was engaged in this same period in a project to train public sector supervisors and stewards to identify employees in need of basic skills upgrading and to help them enrol in area literacy programmes. A BCEL report on the Milwaukee initiative noted that the public library was working closely "with personnel depart-

ments of municipal and county governments, as well as with the municipal and public employees unions, to develop workshops for middle managers" to assist them in the identification of basic skills deficiencies (BCEL, No. 31, April 1992:2). Similarly, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit in England has, in more recent years, included in its agenda for workplace basic skills the objective of 'embedding' basic skills instruction in industry through "accrediting training programs for personnel and training managers" (Shohet, 1994:4).

In what may represent the most significant industry-wide assessment, the U.S. federal government in the late 1980s announced that all commercial drivers would have to pass a "comprehensive written and oral knowledge exam and related driving test (by April 1992) or risk losing their licenses and their jobs" (BCEL, No. 29, October 1991:7). No less than four million workers were affected by the ruling. The BCEL report on the federally mandated test observed that the official manual for the test was a "120-page document ... with technical terminology and diagrams." "Even drivers with average reading skills and a 'hands-on' knowledge of their trade," the report noted, "may have lost their test-taking skills over the years, or may have difficulty with the technical nature of the materials and exam questions. For those with low literacy or ESL skill, the challenge is even more formidable" (ibid).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the promotion of workplace literacy programmes in light of the impacts—both probable and manifest—on workers in their workplaces as well as in the labour market. The promotion of workplace literacy programmes,

it has been argued, is one component of a broad state strategy to extend capital's role in the direct funding of education and training as well as to make adult basic education more directly responsive to the needs of business and industry. The promotion has essentially entailed bringing the workforce literacy campaigns—with their generalized problematizing of entire sections of workers, their unfounded claims, and their overstatement of the benefits of limited 'literacy' provision—into the workplace itself. The process, it has been argued, is inherently threatening to employees. For, though employers have not been generally receptive to the arguments of the workplace literacy promoters, it is probable that they have increased their scrutiny of workers, primarily with a view to 'deselection'. In the United States, in particular, there is clear evidence that employers have capitalized on the problematizing of workers, and the 'tools' provided by workplace literacy promoters, to extend their prerogative through legislation and to institute new (and punitive) workplace policies relating to screening, testing and training.

It is clear from the discussion in this chapter that the entire workforce literacy campaigning and workplace literacy promotion undertaking has created a climate in which workers are being subjected to significantly increased risk of losing their jobs or of being disqualified for promotions or wage increases on the basis of supposed 'basic skills deficiencies'. Many others are prevented from ever being hired or rehired because of the increased use of screening for so called 'basic skills' competencies. That this is happening at a time when even the best educated and most formally qualified workers face both serious employment insecurity and

high levels of unemployment further increases the risks of such campaigning for the less formally qualified.

Yet, those who have engaged in campaigning on the issue of alleged worker 'illiteracy'—whether to the general public or to employers and employer groups—as well as those who have promoted or marketed worker literacy or 'basic skills' programmes have generally presented their endeavour as beneficial to workers. They typically downplay the risk element for workers (though they usually acknowledge it), and magnify the assumed benefits which targeted workers will reap from participation in their programmes. This is generally as true of labour's participation in the promotion of workplace literacy programmes as of any other agency or organization involved.

The next chapter examines what happens when those agencies and organizations do succeed in persuading employers to support (or at least permit) the establishment of literacy/basic skills programmes at work sites. The central question addressed is whether programmes developed in response to supposed worker basic skills deficiencies mitigate the risks to which the promotion of such programmes exposes workers or, on the contrary, whether such programmes actually exacerbate those risks.

Chapter 7

Workplace Literacy Programmes
The Promise Versus the Reality

INTRODUCTION

For many engaged in the workforce literacy campaigns, the primary objective has been to persuade employers to fund the establishment of literacy/basic skills programmes for their employees or, minimally, to support the establishment at their workplaces of state funded literacy/basic skills programmes. In either case, the process of establishing programmes targeted at supposed 'literacy deficient' workers typically begins with the would-be deliverers of such programmes persuading both employers and workers of the need. As the preceding chapter discussed, this process is itself fraught with contradictions and may have impacts on the workers targeted, irrespective of whether a programme is subsequently established.

This chapter focuses on the phenomenon of the 'workplace literacy/basic skills programme' itself. The primary objective is to assess whether such programmes, on balance, constitute a gain for workers. Since, as Chapter 6 discussed, there are risks (both manifest and latent) associated with the promotion of workplace literacy programmes, a central question which this chapter will examine is whether the programmes themselves—by virtue of their quality or their outcomes, for example—go any way towards mitigating the risks to which the promotion of the programmes has at least potentially exposed targeted workers or, on the contrary, whether such programmes may, in fact, present additional risks.

Workplace Literacy Programmes

The first section of the chapter describes the general features of workplace literacy programmes in each of the three countries in question. It looks, first, at the degree to which the workforce literacy campaigns and active promotion of programmes has succeeded in persuading employers to establish literacy/basic skills programmes for their workforces. The evidence of both programme density and the funding of programmes suggests a generally poor response. For, in spite of the extensive (and intensive) promotion described in the preceding chapter, the actual number of programmes established over the period of the campaigning and promotion has been negligible. And, as this section also establishes, the majority of workplace literacy/basic skills programmes which have been established are not employer responses to the campaigning and promotion but are, in fact, a part of the promotion itself—publicly funded or supported 'demonstration' or 'pilot' programmes intended to persuade employers of the benefits of such programmes.

In addition to examining the extent of workplace literacy programmes, the first section of this chapter also looks at the principal models of workplace literacy programmes in each of the three countries. As this section documents, while the *ad hoc*, 'demonstration' nature of the majority of programmes might imply a considerable diversity, there are several clearly definable approaches to the development of workplace literacy programmes and, in the case of each country, there are dominant trends and models.

The second section of this chapter presents a critical analysis of workplace literacy programmes in terms of benefits and risks for worker/participants. It argues that the experimental nature of most programmes, combined with the aggressive 'recruitment'

strategies of many deliverers, presents a high degree of risk for many (if not most) workers. This section also provides a general assessment of workplace literacy programmes, both intrinsically in terms of the nature and quality of such programmes and, extrinsically, in terms of the operation of programmes within the domain of the labour/capital relationship.

The final section of this chapter examines the question of whether workplace literacy/basic skills programmes have the *potential* to meet the basic educational needs of less formally educated workers and whether the record of trades unions with respect to basic skills provision for workers suggests that greater input into such provision by labour would alleviate any or all of the problems identified here.

Workplace Literacy Programmes: General Features

Extent of workplace literacy programming On both sides of the Atlantic, some amount of workplace-based or worker-targeted programming classed as 'literacy' or 'basic skills' has accompanied the recent period of campaigning and promotion. The actual amount of workplace programming involving workers with low literacy/language competencies is somewhat difficult to assess, owing to both the lack of systematic monitoring and the tendency for a wide range of workplace programming to be recast as 'basic skills' in the wake of campaigning around the issue and the new availability of public funds. The available evidence would suggest, however, that the amount of such programming is negligible—both as a proportion of training provision in general and in terms of the alleged level of need. And it is in no way reflective of the amount of time and money spent on its promotion or the amount of official or media attention it is frequently given.

Workplace Literacy Programmes

In the United States, unlike either Canada or England, the corporate sector has claimed to be extensively involved in the provision of workplace basic skills programmes. Because such claims have shaped much of the recent period of campaigning in North America, they deserve some attention.

One strategy of the corporate-led workforce literacy campaign has been to represent employer-provided in-house training programmes as a public service. Claims such as "Employers Take Over Where Schools Failed to Teach the Basics" (Hymowitz, 1981) and "U.S. Companies ... educators of last resort" (Gorman, 1988) typify this aspect of the corporate campaign. In part, the portrayal of capital as a public service deliverer has constituted a public relations strategy; and it has served to lend credibility to capital's claims to educational expertise in its efforts to gain increasing influence over public educational expenditures. But, importantly, it has also been used to strengthen the corporate lobby for training tax credits and direct government funding of employer-provided training (see, for example, Work in America Institute, 1993; Speights, undated; Vencill, Clausen and Drury, 1991).

The claims of corporate involvement in basic skills provision in the United States are self-evidently exaggerated and, in general, the various claims appear to bear no relation to each other. An early 1990s report, for example, claimed that about a third of the private-sector total of $30 billion spent on training went to basic skills programmes (Speights, undated:5). Another account (Zemke, 1989:35) claimed that "corporate America [was] spending $300 million a year on remedial three R's training for employees"—considerably less than $10 billion, but still undoubtedly exaggerated. Yet another report, published by the New York-based Center for Public Resources,

claimed that "75 percent of the country's largest corporations now offer some kind of basic skills training" (cited in Goddard, 1989:10). AT&T was listed in that report as spending $6 million dollars annually on basic skills; General Motors and IBM together as spending a total of $700 million on "adult education" (ibid). More recently, a 1996 inventory of employer provided training reported that 18 percent of all U.S. companies with 100 or more employees sponsors remedial, or "The Three R's" training (*Training*, 1996:65). No indication of the amount spent by companies on such training is provided.

A report on workplace literacy by the Work in America Institute offers some insights into the meaning of the corporate claims. The 1993 report profiled six major corporations which it claimed were providing basic skills training. The 'basic skills' described in this report ranged from a "Manufacturing Education Program" teaching "new technologies and methods such as teamwork, statistical process control, and just-in-time inventory control" to a programme designed to facilitate the reorganization of 112 job classifications into three by training workers to handle a wider range and greater complexity of tasks (Work in America Institute, 1993:2). Similarly, a *Training* magazine report entitled 'Basic Training in the Corporate Schoolhouse' noted that the United Auto Workers-Ford national Basic Skills Enhancement Program had recently dropped the 'basic' from its name since what was taught in the programme was "beyond what a layperson would call basic—algebra, trigonometry, statistics" (Lee, 1988:32). And, at Onan Corporation, it was noted, "The definition of *basic* is shifting upward ... so that basic is now becoming what was once semi-technical" (ibid).

Clearly, what is being touted by corporations as 'remedial', 'Three R's' and 'basic

skills' training is, in many (if not most) cases, firm-specific training. Indeed, considering that larger corporations are more likely to demand higher entry level qualifications and to utilize intensive screening procedures, it is highly unlikely that 'basic skills deficits' are ever an issue for them.

A better indication of the extent of workplace literacy programming in American companies is that provided by reports on the federally sponsored National Workplace Literacy Program and statewide initiatives, the best known of which was the Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative. The Massachusetts initiative, for example, funded twenty-five workplace education projects (operating at 40 worksites and union programmes) in the five years from its establishment in 1986 (Sperazi, 1991). The National Workplace Literacy Program, a programme of the U.S. Department of Education, awarded grants totalling $41 million in its first three years of operation, 1988/89 to 1990/91. The grants had funded programmes serving approximately 67,000 workers in 360 different businesses (BCEL, No. 33, October 1992:12). Together, the Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative (terminated in 1991) and the National Workplace Literacy Program (terminated in 1997) represented the most significant, and the most prominent, 'basic skills' programming in the United States; a projection of density of workplace literacy programming based on the two programmes would indicate that, at the peak of activity, a few hundred programmes classed as basic skills were in operation at any one time.

In England, by contrast, the total of workplace literacy programmes in operation at any one time might be counted in the tens. Until 1987, virtually the only workplace literacy programmes were those delivered by Workbase Training in the London region.

It is estimated that, in 1991-92—the period in which the bulk of the research for this study was conducted in that country—there were approximately 30 workplace literacy programmes in operation, involving fewer than 300 workers. Since that time, there have been new infusions of public funds—the 1991 Basic Skills at Work (BSAW) initiative, for example—intended, in part, to stimulate the involvement of Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in the promotion of workplace basic skills (Tucket, 1991). There has been no substantial increase in programme density, however. Shohet (1994) reported that, as of 1994 when the BSAW funding was scheduled to come to an end, 40 projects had been set up in companies through the initiative.

In Canada, a 1991 national survey of workplace literacy programmes documented seventy-one distinct programmes or programme models (Johnston, 1991). In some cases, a programme model might be operating in a number of worksites. The 1991 estimate for Ontario's labour federation programmes, for example, was 100 worksites (ibid). The density of programming has varied considerably across provinces, with some provinces (Ontario and Quebec, for example) approaching the level of provision of the most involved American states while in other provinces there has been virtually no workplace literacy activity. It would appear that the development of workplace literacy programming in Canada peaked in the early 1990s, although a 1997 increase of $7 million in annual funding to the National Literacy Secretariat has been largely earmarked for workplace literacy, so the trend may reverse (Fairbairn, 1997).

Workplace literacy programmes: approaches and models In both North America and England, the development of workplace literacy/basic skills programmes has proceeded with little systematic planning. In fact, as the next section of this chapter elaborates,

among the dominant features of workplace literacy programmes on either side of the Atlantic have been both their *ad hoc* and their experimental nature. This has obvious implications for any attempt to either distinguish approaches or models, or define national trends. The difficulty is particularly great for both Canada and the United States where, in spite of attempts to establish either state/provincial or national models, there has been significant local and regional variation.

This caveat notwithstanding, however, the range of typical variables may be fairly definitively described. Figures 1 and 2 present comprehensive (though not necessarily exhaustive) lists of the primary variables which characterize both the organization and the implementation of programmes in all three countries. Figure 1 lists the primary variables relating to the *organization* of existing workplace literacy/basic skills programmes. It should be understood that this chart presents a simple list of the range; it does not make reference to either the relative extent of one arrangement or practice over another or its presence (or absence) in one country or another. Figure 2 similarly presents a list of the range of variables which characterize the *implementation* of existing workplace literacy programmes. Like Figure 1, Figure 2 does not distinguish either the extent or the location of particular arrangements or practices.

Figure 1

EXISTING WORKPLACE LITERACY PROGRAMMES
PRIMARY ORGANIZATIONAL VARIABLES

Programme Deliverers	• Public educational institutions (In North America these include school boards and colleges; in England, further education colleges, adult education institutes and local education authority adult education divisions.) • Private training agencies/consultancies • Company trainers • Trades unions • Volunteer literacy organizations • Community organizations
Management and Organization of Programmes	• Organized and managed by programme deliverer • Organized and managed jointly by programme deliverer and employer • Organized and managed jointly by employer, trades union and programme deliverer • Organized and managed solely by employer
Funding of Programmes	• Funding for programme development and delivery provided directly by state grant or by state agency • Funding for programme development and delivery provided indirectly by the state—public institutions and organizations/agencies funded by state grant (including trades unions) provide the programme free of charge to the employer • Funding for programme delivery provided by employer (Programme development may be included in the charge to employer or may be covered by the deliverer.) • Joint funding of programme by employer or employer/trades union and state-funded deliverer • Programme costs may include paid release time for workers as well as the costs of replacement labour. It is common for participants' time in programmes to be wholly or partially their own time. If there are actual expenditures on replacement labour, these are most commonly borne by the employer. • Non-participating workers may contribute to the costs of a programme through direct trades union contributions of funds as well as through 'covering' for workers attending the programme. They may also contribute volunteer tutoring services in their own time.

Processes for Assessing the Need for Programmes

- Administration of employer-wide, workplace-wide or selective 'literacy needs assessment', typically by employer, would-be deliverer or workplace literacy consultant. Assessment methods include individual interviews (either random or targeted) which may or may not involve the completion of standard literacy or numeracy tasks and the administration of standardized tests in reading and/or mathematics (again, either random or targeted).
- Informal indentification of workers with presumed literacy/numeracy/language deficiencies—typically by supervisors or trades union representatives
- Programmes may be instituted without an assessment of need. The process would normally involve discussion and agreement between the employer or the employer/trades union and the programme deliverer. The programme is then advertised at the workplace either generally or selectively and workers who come forward have, at least in some measure, self-selected.

Figure 2

EXISTING WORKPLACE LITERACY PROGRAMMES
PRIMARY PROGRAMMING VARIABLES

Programme Types

- Short courses. Typically ranging from 5 to 140 hours, over one day to one year, short courses include:
  - 'generic' courses (The most common generic courses are in either Communications or Mathematics. They may or may not lead to accreditation.)
  - customized courses derived, for example, from specifically expressed employer/worker needs, organizational needs assessments or literacy task analyses of jobs (Customized courses do not normally lead to formal, externally recognized accreditation.)

  Both generic and customized courses may use materials from the workplace as the basis of instruction.
- Formal accredited courses (Course duration is generally pre-set, but workplace courses may be compressed or shortened to suit the employer). The most common formal courses include:
  - General Educational Development (GED) preparation courses (Canada and the U.S.)
  - courses for credit towards Adult Basic Education diploma (Canada and the U.S.) or towards City and Guilds Wordpower or Numberpower accreditation (England)
- Informal programmes without set curriculum
  - may be delivered by professional teachers, trades unions or volunteer tutors.
  - may focus on developing general literacy competencies or may be specifically geared towards workplace and/or trades union reading and/or writing and communications demands.

- Formal adult Literacy courses
  - may be college, school board or local education authority literacy programme, pre-packaged volunteer tutoring programme, or other commercial literacy package.

Staffing of Programmes

- Professional teachers
  - may be hired by public educational institution, trades union, voluntary/community agency, private training consultancy, or directly by employer.
  - may work alone or with another teacher in the workplace literacy programme, or the professional teachers' work may be supported/supplemented by volunteer tutors (including supervisors or other workers acting as 'peer tutors').
  - may or may not be unionized.
- Non-professional paid tutors (typically hired by community organizations)
- Volunteer tutors
  - may be recruited by literacy volunteer organization either from outside the workplace through regular volunteer recruitment drives or through specific recruitment drives within the workplace (from the ranks of managers and supervisors as well as shop-floor workers).
  - may be recruited by trades union from within the workplace or within the union's general membership.
  - may be recruited by local literacy network, including public educational institutions and state agencies.
  - may be recruited from the ranks of social welfare recipients through workfare/trainfare programmes.
- Professional trainers

Methods of Instruction

- Group instruction
  - may be used by professional teachers and trainers as well as by non-professional and volunteer tutors.
- Individualized instruction
  - may be used by professional teachers and trainers (using modularized curriculum) but is more typical of non-professional and volunteer tutors.
- Computer-based and video/television instruction
  - may be used by all types of deliverers.
  - may be sole method of instruction or may be one element of mixed instructional model.
- Self instruction
  - Company 'learning centres' may provide some access to professional or volunteer instruction but also typically rely heavily on 'self-instruction' through printed as well as electronic learning 'packages'.
  - Employees may be given print or electronic learning 'packages' to study at home in their own time. Both employers and trades unions have used this option in the case of workplace literacy programmes.

Scheduling and Compensation Arrangements

- Programmes may be provided prior to a shift beginning or immediately at the end of a shift; workers participate on their own time. In some cases they may be paid for the time spent in the programme.
- Programmes may be provided just prior to the beginning or end of a shift; workers typically participate half on paid-release time, half on their own time.
- Workers may be given paid release for a block of time to attend a programme. (They may, for example, be given a day a week for 5 weeks.)
- Workers may be replaced at their jobs (by additional paid labour) while they attend programmes. Alternatively, and more commonly, co-workers may be expected to cover for them and/or they may be expected to complete unfinished work when they return from the programme.
- When company learning centres and home-study are used, workers are not typically compensated for any of the time spent studying.

Programme Locations

- Workplace (Although workplace locations include meeting rooms—and even occasionally board rooms, programmes are more typically located in less favourable locations including staff rooms and cafeterias. In some instances classes are conducted on or near the production floor itself. In other instances no particular location is assigned to the programme; the programme must remain mobile and find a location for each class period.)
- Conference centres or other meeting/classroom facilities (including public educational institutions and union halls) are used in some cases. This is more likely to happen when workers are released for a block of time which is a relatively uncommon feature of workplace literacy organization.

Methods of Recruiting Participants

- Workplace or employer-wide advertising of programmes (generally following organizational needs assessment by would-be deliverer and typically leading to self-identification and voluntary enrolment in programme)
- Formal identification through testing sponsored by the employer, followed by either voluntary or compulsory enrolment in programme
- Informal identification and active recruitment by trade union representatives
- Informal identification and active recruitment by supervisors or human resources personnel

Methods of Evaluating Workers' Performance in Programmes

- Standardized tests
- Tests of achievement on course material
- Documentation of material completed while in the programme
- Supervisor/manager review of material completed while in the programme
- Supervisors' assessment of behavioural and/or atttitudinal changes, measurement of productivity and/or performance following completion of programme
  - may be formal or informal.

It is clear from even a cursory reading of Figures 1 and 2 that, unlike perhaps any other area of worker education or training, the categorization of a programme as workplace literacy/basic skills in itself provides little indication of the nature of programme to which it refers. The list of variables is extensive and the range of possible permutations is considerable. A programme may, for example, provide paid release time from work for worker/participants to complete a formal credit course with a professional teacher from the local community college or further education college; or it may involve workers being individually tutored on their own time by co-workers, supervisors or volunteers from outside the workplace. The two are obviously quite different—in terms of the opportunity provided as well as the issues which are likely to arise. Yet these are only two variants among a potentially quite large array of programme types which may be subsumed under the label 'workplace literacy/basic skills'.

Workplace literacy programmes: national trends

Although existing workplace literacy programmes are characterized by a wide variety of arrangements and practices, there are nonetheless clearly discernible patterns in respect of several of those variables in each of the three countries examined. Figure 3 presents a summary of the national trends, in terms of a number of key variables, for each country. The trends are analyzed and presented in accordance with the framework utilized in Figures 1 and 2—that is, with respect to *organizational* and *programming* variables.

Figure 3

NATIONAL TRENDS IN WORKPLACE LITERACY PROGRAMMING
UNITED STATES, ENGLAND AND CANADA

United States

Organizational

- The dominant programme management arrangement is 'partnership'—the model mandated by the federal government's National Workplace Literacy Program. Such partnerships typically involve a public educational institution or community/literacy volunteer organization and the employer or employer/trades union.
- Trades unions are involved in a minority of workplace literacy programmes.
- Most documented programmes are funded, either wholly or substantially, by direct federal or state grants; a significant proportion of all workplace programming is delivered without charge to the employer by publicly funded educational institutions or community/volunteer organizations.
- Workplace literacy assessments are conducted by a range of institutions, agencies and individuals including newly specialized 'workplace literacy consultants'. Workplace assessments involve a wide range of methods but the use of the 'literacy task analysis' is more common in the United States than elsewhere. In some cases, assessments are industry or employer-wide.
- The dominant delivery agents are public educational institutions (community colleges or school boards). In some regions, literacy volunteer organizations and community groups also have significant involvement in workplace literacy programme delivery. In a few jurisdictions trades unions are the primary delivery agents.

Programming

- Formal accredited courses (principally GED preparation) and generic short courses form a significant proportion of workplace programming. Where there are specific state or federal workplace literacy initiatives, however, customized programming derived from literacy tasks analyses or organizational needs assessments are more typical—and are, in many cases, mandated. A substantial proportion of programmes developed under such initiatives are language programmes for workers with limited English proficiency. Literacy volunteer organizations typically use their own established tutoring programmes.
- Programme staffing arrangements vary widely and include professional teachers, trainers and non-professional tutors (both paid and volunteer).
- Methods of instruction vary, depending on the deliverer. Computer-based and video/television instruction as well as commercial learning packages are widely used. Individualized tutoring and self-instruction are also common.
- Scheduling of workplace literacy programmes generally coincides with the beginning or end of shifts and workers typically participate half in

paid time and half in their own time. There is more government regulation of job-related training in the United States than in either Canada or England and it would appear that, in some cases, workers may be paid for time beyond work time that they spend in workplace literacy programmes. In union-run programmes, workers generally participate entirely on their own time without compensation.

- The dominant method of evaluating workers' performance in programmes is standardized testing. Productivity measurements and supervisor assessments are promoted by deliverers—and these have been the assessment methods recommended by the National Workplace Literacy Program—but they are evidently not much used by employers.
- Programmes tend to be located at the workplace or, in the case of larger employers, at company learning centres. Programmes at the workplace are located in a wide range of sites, from the cafeteria to the production floor. Union-run programmes may be located at the workplace or in a union or community facility.
- Workers are recruited to programmes through the full range of methods listed in Figure 2. Non-voluntary enrolment in workplace literacy programmes would appear to be more common in the U.S. than in either Canada or England.

England

Organizational

- Virtually all workplace literacy programmes are organized and managed by the deliverer, although the employer and trades union(s) are typically invited to participate at the planning stage. This model, established by Workbase Training, has been promoted to both local education authority and further education college staff by the national state agency for literacy, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit.
- Trades unions are involved in an advisory or facilitating capacity in the majority of workplace literacy programmes. They do not, however, organize or run such programmes themselves.
- Most documented programmes have been funded, at least initially, through state grants to Workbase Training, local education authorities or further education colleges expressly for the development of workplace literacy demonstration projects. Programmes which are not directly grant funded by the state have tended to be in public sector workplaces.
- Workplace literacy assessments are typically done by the would-be deliverer. All deliverers use a similar assessment method, generally based on the Workbase model and promoted by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit. The method involves a general assessment of skill requirements for the job classifications targeted, primarily based on interviews with supervisors and line managers, followed by assessments of a sample of workers through individual (and confidential) interviews.
- The dominant delivery agents are public educational institutions (further education colleges or local education authority adult education divisions). The primary exception to this has been Workbase Training, a private training consultancy supported by both unions and employers which, until the early 1990s, was substantially funded by

the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit. There have also been a few instances of employer delivered 'basic skills' training, usually through company learning centres.

Programming

- Generic courses in Communications or Mathematics form a substantial proportion of workplace literacy programming, though these are typically 'customized' to incorporate material from the workplace. Depending on the level of ability of the student, elements of the courses may be credited towards eventual accreditation—for example, a City and Guilds Communications (Wordpower) certificate or a National Vocational Qualification (Level 1) credential. Workplace courses do not typically lead to such a qualification in themselves, however. Fully customized courses based on employer needs (for example, to facilitate the implementation of a Continuous Improvement regime) are also common.
- Courses are taught, virtually without exception, by professional staff of public educational institutions or training consultancies such as Workbase.
- Instructional methods are relatively uniform and group instruction by a professional teacher is the norm. Little use is made of learning packages, either print or electronic, although they are more likely to feature in company learning centres.
- Programmes are typically scheduled to coincide with the beginning or end of a shift and workers typically participate half on paid time and half on their own time. There have also been instances of programmes (primarily, if not solely, sponsored by public sector employers) where workers have been given blocks of fully paid release time from work to participate—for example, two days a week for six weeks.
- The dominant methods of evaluating workers' performance in programmes are informal, combining assessments by union representatives, supervisors and workers/participants themselves. As in the United States, supervisors are typically asked to assess whether the course has resulted in positive change in workers' attitudes, behaviour and performance.
- Programmes are held in a variety of locations, including conference and educational facilities. More typically, however, they are held in any available space on the employer's premises.
- Workers are generally recruited to programmes through workplace or employer-wide recruitment drives. Trades union representatives are frequently involved in advertising programmes and encouraging workers to participate.

Canada

Organizational

- Programme management approaches vary widely and, although the 'partnership' model is strongly promoted by the federal government through the publicly funded organization ABC Canada, sole management by the programme deliverer is perhaps the most common approach.

- Trades unions are involved in a substantial proportion of workplace literacy programmes, though where they do not control the funds, their involvement is likely to be limited to advice and facilitation. Unlike England, many programmes are run in unorganized workplaces and, even where there are unions, programmes may be run without reference to the union.
- As in the United States and England, the majority of programmes are funded through the state—either directly through grant or indirectly through the free delivery of the service by publicly funded institutions or volunteer/community organizations.
- Workplace literacy assessments are typically done by would-be deliverers but also, as in the United States, by consultants. The principal agency promoting workplace literacy programmes through the use of free assessment services (ABC Canada) is funded by the federal government and corporate philanthropic grants. Though organizational needs assessments and job literacy task analyses are promoted by ABC Canada and others, they are not generally mandated by funders. Informal assessments (or the simple presumption of need) appear to be more common. As in the United States, industry and employer-wide assessments have been conducted in a few instances.
- There is no clearly dominant delivery agent. Both the federal government and those provinces which have supported workplace literacy programmes favour a range of deliverers over a public education model. Volunteer organizations and trades union federations operate the more prominent programme models.

Programming

- Informal courses customized to meet employer/workplace needs are among the most common, regardless of the deliverer. These would not normally result in accreditation. Public educational institutions, in addition to the customized course option, also provide formal accredited courses, including GED preparation and Adult Basic Education credit courses. As in the United States, literacy volunteer organizations may also use their own tutoring programmes. Trades union federation programmes do not generally use developed courses or curricula. In the province of Ontario, a substantial proportion of trades union-delivered programmes are targeted at workers with limited English proficiency.
- Programme staffing arrangements vary, depending on the deliverer. There is substantial use of non-professional (paid and volunteer) tutors, however, because of the prominence of literacy volunteer and community organizations as well as trades unions in workplace literacy delivery. The principal trades union delivery model, promoted by the Canadian Labour Congress, is based on volunteer teaching by a co-worker.
- Methods of instruction vary, depending on the deliverer. Group teaching is the primary method of public educational institutions and some trades union programmes. One-to-one tutoring is the primary method used by literacy volunteer organizations. Computer-based instruction, video/television instruction, and commercial learning packages are widely used by all deliverers, including trades unions.
- Programmes are generally conducted at the end of shifts and workers typically participate half in paid time and half in their own time. There are, however, many examples of workers participating entirely

in their own time, including those in union-run programmes. There are virtually no documented instances of workers participating entirely in paid time.

- Methods of evaluating workers' performance vary widely. Where there is a set curriculum, performance on the course material is common. Standardized reading tests are used in some cases. As in the United States and England, virtually all customized and informal programmes encourage supervisors and line managers to assess change in workers' attitudes, behaviour and performance.
- The majority of programmes (including those run by trades unions) are located at the workplace in a wide range of sites, from meeting rooms to the production floor itself.
- Workers are recruited to programmes through a variety of methods. In the case of trades union federation programmes, recruitment by trades union representatives may be fairly aggressive and frequently takes place outside of work. In general, enrolment in programmes is voluntary.

As Figure 3 documents, there are key distinctions in several aspects of the two sets of variables among the three countries. Of the three, England has the most uniform approach to both the organization and implementation of workplace literacy programmes. There is, essentially, one model utilized in that country—the model developed by Workbase Training, initially as a trades union basic skills project from the late 1970s through the early 1980s, and later as an independent agency with both employer and trades union representation. Workbase programmes constituted virtually the only workplace literacy programmes in England for over a decade. When local education authorities and further education colleges started to become involved in delivery from the early 1990s, the Workbase approach was promoted by the state central literacy agency, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU), as the model to be replicated. Workbase staff were engaged by ALBSU to provide training in their methods for marketing to employers, conducting workplace assessments and developing and delivering programmes. A guide detailing its approach was produced by Workbase (Rees, 1990), with funding from ALBSU, for distribution to local

education authorities and further education colleges with an interest in becoming involved in workplace literacy/basic skills delivery. The central elements of the Workbase model—which would become the English model—include a predominance of generic short courses in Communications or Mathematics with some customization to reflect workplace or employer priorities; needs assessment and delivery by a public institution or by a private training consultancy such as Workbase Training itself; teaching by professional staff; informal evaluation of workers' performance with a strong focus on employer/supervisor input; and the involvement of trades unions in a facilitative and advisory role in the majority of programmes. In its earliest phase in 1978 (as the NUPE Basic Skills Project), Workbase had attempted to use volunteer tutors, but the arrangement was soon found to be unsatisfactory and it was discontinued (Bonnerjea, 1987). It has evidently not been raised as a serious option since that time and there is currently little or no use of volunteer tutoring in workplace literacy programmes in England, although volunteers continue to play a significant role in the general adult literacy programmes of many local education authorities. There is also little use of off-the-shelf learning 'packages', either print or electronic, although the development of literacy and numeracy credit courses in the early 1990s (City and Guilds certified Wordpower and Numberpower), has tended to restrict the focus of much adult literacy tuition to the objectives specified for those courses.

Overall, the approach to the promotion of workplace literacy programming—while, in many respects, similar to North American approaches—is more sober. Though the marketing of the service has evidently borrowed much from the American workforce literacy campaigns, the general context for the promotion of workplace literacy pro-

grammes has also been shaped by the affirmative action/equal opportunities policies of certain public sector employers (notably local authorities such as Lambeth) and public sector trades unions (notably NUPE and COHSE—now UNISON). The promotion of literacy/basic skills programmes in the context of seeking increased training opportunities for manual workers in sectors dominated by females and ethnic minorities has given the entire workplace literacy/basic skills issue a somewhat different complexion in England than it has had in either Canada or the United States. As the preceding chapter discussed, however, many of the same issues and problems which attend the promotion of workplace literacy programmes in North America also characterize its promotion in England; and, as the next section of this chapter argues, the problems and issues which attend the *provision* of workplace literacy programmes are also not significantly different on either side of the Atlantic.

In contrast to England, the development of workplace literacy programmes in both Canada and the United States has been characterized by enormous variation in approaches and models. To some extent the variation has followed political boundaries, with states and provinces adopting models more or less uniform within the jurisdiction, but widely divergent from the predominant model(s) in other states or provinces. The variation can also be accounted for, in part, by the political contexts of the workforce literacy campaigns in both Canada and the United States[1] and the differing goals of various participants in those campaigns.

Notwithstanding an overall pattern of mixed—and frequently quite complex—approaches, a principal model of workplace literacy programming has, neverthe-

[1] Again, in contrast to England where there was no such generalized campaign.

less, emerged in the United States. That model is the one promoted by both the federal government's National Workplace Literacy Program (initiated in 1988 and terminated in early 1997) and some of the more prominent state workplace literacy initiatives—most notably, the Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative which, as previously noted, ran from 1986 to 1991. A distinguishing feature of both the federal and Massachusetts models was the central role given to the employer in the development of programme objectives and content, and the concomitant diminution of the autonomy of the deliverer, typically a public educational institution. The model generally mandates that the deliverer of a workplace literacy programme form a 'partnership' with the employer (or, optionally, a three-way partnership with the employer and the trades union or unions) for the organization and management of the programme. In the case of the federal initiative, which influenced the development of programmes in most regions of the country over the period of its operation, funding guidelines dictated that the curriculum of workplace literacy programmes should be specific to the workplace and utilize job related 'texts' as the basis for instruction (Hull, 1991). Similarly, as the next section of this chapter discusses, the Massachusetts initiative strongly discouraged local deliverers (of adult Literacy and English as a Second Language) from bringing their regular curricula to workplace programmes.

Although the model of 'partnerships' and job or workplace-specific programme development became the officially sanctioned model for workplace literacy programmes in the United States, it should be noted that a range of programmes which do not conform to the principal requirements of the model have continued to be delivered by public educational institutions and supported by both employers and trades unions.

For many employers (as well as for many trades unions), there is little interest in becoming involved in the co-management of programmes and, indeed, many undoubtedly see it as a waste of time. A significant proportion of employers continue to leave the organization, management and delivery of general and academic courses to the local public education system which frequently provides the service free of charge (Vencill et al., 1991).

Formal accredited courses which count towards eventual high school graduation continue to be the choice of many workers with low levels of education or formal qualification. For many others (perhaps the majority) the first choice is the 'fast route' to the qualification, the General Educational Development (GED) examination. Preparation courses for the GED examination are among the most heavily subscribed of all courses offered to workers. Short, formal courses in Communications and Mathematics also continue to be high on both workers' and employers' priority training lists and they constitute a significant proportion of programming classed as workplace 'basic skills' (ibid). However, it would appear from the documentation on both the National Workplace Literacy Programme and the Massachusetts Workplace Education Programme that a majority of programmes publicly funded as 'basic skills' in the United States are English as a Second Language programmes (Schultz, 1992; Sperazi, 1991).

Evaluation of workers' performance in programmes designated 'workplace literacy/basic skills' is another area in which the general practice in the United States has been to some degree distinct. For here, there is a much stronger emphasis on the use of formal testing (including standardized tests) than is typical of either Canada or

England. Additionally, the federal Workplace Literacy Program expressly required that the programmes it funded demonstrate their impact on company productivity (Evaluation Research, 1992); this requirement inevitably gave rise to efforts to measure a range of indicators of worker productivity and performance as key elements of worker assessment/programme evaluation.

In the case of Canada, no one model has become clearly dominant in terms of usage, although the United States' officially sanctioned model (of shared programme management and programme content derived from workplace needs assessment and/or job task analysis) is the approach promoted nationally by ABC Canada, the organization which originated in 1986 as the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy and which has been kept in existence for the past decade through direct federal government grant funding. Although ABC Canada does not represent the government in an official capacity, its links are direct and the approach it espouses has been unofficially sanctioned by the federal government. Several publications on workplace literacy funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, for example, have supported the model and provided would-be deliverers with practical advice on conducting organizational and job literacy needs assessments (see, for example, Taylor and Lewe, 1990; Taylor, Lewe and Draper, 1991; Waugh, 1992).

The Canadian federal government has also directly supported the movement of volunteer literacy organizations into workplaces. Indeed, the first direct involvement of the federal government in workplace literacy—directly following the launch of the American workforce literacy television and radio campaign—was the 1986 allocation of substantial grant funding to both Laubach Literacy (the then newly arrived Canadian

branch of an American volunteer literacy organization) and Frontier College (a Toronto-based volunteer organization) for the development and delivery of workplace programmes. Both organizations have continued to promote volunteer, one-on-one tutoring in the workplace but the approach has not been enthusiastically received by either employers or workers and neither the Laubach nor the Frontier workplace programmes have attained a national presence.

Another trend which has distinguished Canada to some degree from the United States has been the level of involvement of trades unions in the delivery of workplace literacy programmes. For, although a few jurisdictions in the U.S. have allocated portions of public funds for workplace literacy programmes to trades unions, the trend has been largely localized. In Canada, by contrast, two provinces have included trades unions among the core organizers of the service. In Ontario, trades unions have been given a virtual monopoly over the establishment and delivery of workplace literacy programmes for unionized workers; the principal model they use is volunteer teaching by co-workers and informal curricula. In Quebec, the Federation of Labour also controls workplace literacy programmes for its members, though its approach (at least in the initial phase) was to contract deliverers from either the public educational system or community literacy organizations. In several other provinces, there is considerable involvement of trades unions in programme delivery—some using the Ontario model, some the Quebec model; in other cases trades unions form partnerships with educational institutions or private trainers for the delivery of programmes or hire their own staff to deliver the programme.

The ongoing devolution of both funding and responsibility for worker training from the state to the private sector in Canada has created a situation in which a number of potential deliverers, including trades unions, private training agencies and community organizations are vying with the public sector, and with each other, for the available funds. Indeed, this may be the principal defining feature of Canadian workplace literacy trends.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the workplace literacy programming trend in all three countries is that the majority of such programmes are not established by employers as a response to either manifest need or the campaigning/promotional messages of the state and its funded delivery agencies. Rather, they are a component of the promotion itself—the state's equivalent of retailing's 'promotional gift' to employers. In both England and North America, virtually all workplace literacy programming has had either the whole or the majority share of funding contributed by the state—either directly through grant funding or indirectly through the provision of the service, free of charge, by public institutions. The general trend has been well summed up in a 1991 report on workplace education in small business, sponsored by the U.S. Small Business Administration. The report noted that few of the companies studied had started their programmes "because of a strong internal motivation; rather they got involved because someone made it easy for them to do so. Typically a workplace education specialist had approached them and offered a no-cost and "no-hassle" programme that sounded like a good idea" (Vencill et al, 1991:iv).

A 1992 report on workplace literacy programming by the Conference Board of Canada arrived at a similar conclusion. In all cases reviewed for the study, it was

reported, where programmes had been implemented some form of government funding had been received by the participating organization. In many cases the government funding was the only actual expenditure—company contributions typically consisting of 'in-kind' support. The Conference Board report noted that, "given the 'soft' nature of the accruing benefits and the 'hard' costs of delivering a program, government funding likely makes the decision to provide such training more defensible within the organization" (Conference Board of Canada, 1992:10).

WORKPLACE LITERACY PROGRAMMES: ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

Workplace literacy programmes as experiments One key objective of state strategy on both sides of the Atlantic has been to demonstrate the benefits of workplace literacy/basic skills programmes, in the hope that employers will assume the costs of longer term provision. This has meant that all state-sponsored programmes are, in effect, 'demonstration', 'pilot', or 'experimental' programmes and that the workers/participants are, ultimately, experimental subjects. The result has, in many instances, been less than positive for the workers involved. In describing the Massachusetts state workplace literacy initiative, for example, Stein observed that classifying the initiative as a "research demonstration program" meant that the programmes which the state funded were freed from "having to 'perform' for us, from having to be experts, to know what was right before they even started. As much as the money, this freedom to take risks, to experiment was a critical component in shaping the initiative. We asked them to document everything they did—right or wrong—so we all could learn from it" (undated:19).

In fact, many things would go wrong in the programmes funded under the Massachusetts initiative, as a critical reading of a 1991 report on the initiative (Sperazi, 1991) reveals. In one case study described in the report, for example, an English as a Second Language programme was established for entry level workers in the kitchen and housekeeping departments of a major hotel. Hotel management would not allocate space for the programme but allowed the classes to go ahead in the 'game room' where, as the report notes, "Guests would saunter by the open door and complain that they wanted to use the computer games while employees sat in class" (1991:95). Another report on this programme (Hikes, 1991) observed that video games actually competed with the language classes on some occasions. The programme had to be terminated when its main supporter in the company, the personnel manager, went on sick leave for a month and the programme provider (the local community college) found there were too many obstacles to continue (ibid).

Two other projects funded through the Massachusetts initiative were reported by Hikes to have failed because new plant managers would not agree to continue them; and yet another project was forced to close as a result of a corporate buy-out. The programme providers were given one day's notice by the new owner to discontinue the programme. In another case, an employer spied on a programme when he suspected the teacher of trying to bring a union into the plant because she had invited speakers from the community. The environment, Hikes notes, "became too tense to run the project" and it was discontinued (ibid:329). Not all failures were due to employers, however. According to Hikes, one union-coordinated project nearly failed because the

union's normal activity (an organizing drive and a strike at another facility) left officials with little time to administer a basic skills programme (ibid: 322).

The Massachusetts initiative has been documented better than most—and perhaps more forthrightly than many—but the evidence suggests that the range of problems which arose there was fairly typical of the workplace literacy initiatives across North America and, indeed, in England as well. One of England's most celebrated workplace basic skills programmes, for example—the previously referenced programme at the North West heating engineering company—manifested many of the same kinds of problems and committed many of the same errors as the Massachusetts programmes. When the programme was originally set up, for example, one class was situated in a room with windows in the middle of the factory floor—the participants clearly visible to their non-participant co-workers. Participants reported feeling as if they were in a fish bowl; only after several sessions was it suggested that blinds might be provided for the windows.[2] Early in the life of the programme, a crisis threatened to terminate it when a journalist from a national newspaper, invited to profile the programme for the launch of International Literacy Year, wrote a typical media 'literacy' story (Williams, 1990). She used the words 'literacy' and 'dyslexia', for example, and described workers hiding their reading and writing problems (ibid). Participants who had been encouraged to join what had been called a 'Foundation English' course were humiliated at the newspaper portrayal of the programme and themselves. They were also subjected to ridicule from their co-workers; the programme, which had been named the Open Learning Center, came to be dubbed the 'Early Learning Center'. As

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[2] An account of this is provided by Frank (1990); it was also discussed by shop steward presenters at a June 1992 Adult Learning at Work meeting at the employer's premises, Baxi Heating, Preston.

two shop stewards who had been involved in establishing the programme observed, "The first students to go through suffered as being pioneers ..." (Bootle and Rowley, 1992). As with some of the Massachusetts programmes, the English programme was also undermined by an industrial dispute and major round of redundancies shortly after its startup. Some programme participants lost their jobs, as did two of the shop steward representatives on the programme's organizing committee. As a prior reference to this programme noted, there was suspicion among some programme participants who had been made redundant that their participation in the programme had been a factor in management's decision to terminate them.

Presenting workplace literacy programmes to workers: duplicity or contradictions?

Philip Cohen's discussion of the manner in which the (now defunct) Manpower Services Commission promoted its Youth Training Scheme to various groups provides a useful comparison for the selling of workplace literacy/basic skills programmes. He writes, "I have listened to MSC spokesmen extolling the virtues of YTS to a group of FE teachers, on the grounds that it will increase young people's self-confidence and prepare them for 'life'; to an audience of trade unionists the scheme was represented as equipping school leavers with working skills, and, moreover, reuniting education with material production in a way that Robert Owen, even Marx himself, might have approved. But with only a slight change in emphasis ... I have heard the new vocationalism being sold to a conference of small businessmen, not as creeping socialism, or as an extension of liberal education, but as part of Thatcherite strategy to restructure the economy, sweep away archaic labour practices and instil the virtues of discipline, hard work and respect for authority, in modern youth" (1984:106). The selling of

workplace literacy can be described in virtually identical terms. Indeed, given the way in which worker literacy is generally problematized and workplace literacy programmes 'sold' to employers, it is obvious that some tailoring of the message would be necessary in order to persuade workers to voluntarily enrol in any programme supported (or permitted) by the employer on the basis of such arguments.

Workers who agree to enrol in workplace literacy programmes do not generally do so because they accept that their skill deficits cause accidents, waste supervisors' time, slow production or otherwise compromise profitability. For, with few (if any) exceptions, workers do not hear such arguments and it is likely that they are quite unaware that the arguments have been made. Rather, programmes are typically presented to them as opportunities to enhance their employment prospects—the programmes themselves evidence that management is finally recognizing their potential and their right to training. All too often workers are given to believe (either explicitly or implicitly) that participation may have a direct bearing on promotion and salary potential (see, for example, Carnevale et al, 1991:173), although the evidence suggests that such programmes virtually never produce such results for workers.[3]

Though all workplace literacy providers and promoters tailor their arguments to fit the audience, the divergence between the arguments presented to employers and workers (and, in some cases, to broader audiences as well) is perhaps greatest when labour organizations and trades unions are themselves engaged in promoting and delivering programmes for which the employer's cooperation and support are neces-

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[3] An evaluation of the Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative in the fourth year of its operation, for example, found "that there was *not* a direct correlation between successful participation in a workplace education program and an increase in job mobility or salary" (reported in Hikes, 1991:325).

sary. As the examples of the Ontario unions' promotion of workplace literacy programmes from the preceding chapter clearly illustrate, unions do use essentially the same arguments as any other agency when they set out to persuade employers that their programmes are necessary.

In one of the cases cited, for example, union representatives argued that workers were less capable than the employer believed them to be and claimed that workers' literacy or 'basic skills' deficits were impeding the implementation of a continuous improvement production regime. Yet the programme which these union representatives were promoting was a part of a provincial federation of labour literacy initiative which claimed in its presentations to workers (as well as to the labour movement and the literacy movement) to be primarily about 'empowering' worker/participants. A much-published article describing the initiative, entitled 'So we can make our voices heard' has claimed that the union-run workplace literacy programmes enable participants "to overcome the silence often imposed on them and to take more effective control of their lives at work and in their community" (Turk and Unda, 1991:267). Indeed, it has been claimed that the programme is inspired by Third World 'popular education' projects (Turk, 1989:4). Similarly, a New York labour consortium's worker literacy initiative is described in an article whose title, 'So We Can Use Our Own Names and Write the Laws by Which We Live ...' (Collins, Balmuth and Jean, 1989), implies the same promise as those of the Ontario Federation of Labour representatives.

Perhaps the most questionable feature of the promotion of workplace literacy programming to workers—common to all three countries—is the complicity between programme deliverers and employers—and, in many cases, trades union representa-

tives—around the language used to describe and promote the programmes to workers. Almost universally, the promotion of workplace basic skills programmes to employers locates the supposed problems and issues in terms of adult 'illiteracy'; many promoters refer to the general statistics on adult illiteracy in making projections on the need for remedial workplace programmes (see, for example, Ontario Ministry of Skills Development, undated; Rees, 1990; Ontario Federation of Labour, undated). The problematizing of workers—whether described in terms of 'illiteracy' or 'basic skills deficit'—draws on the entire historical legacy of literacy's (and illiteracy's) supposed impacts.

Yet, while it is generally considered acceptable (even necessary) to present the problem to employers in terms of 'illiteracy' and 'deficit', those who promote and deliver programmes make much of the necessity of 'protecting' workers/participants from the full knowledge of what the programmes actually are. Workers, it is typically argued, would suffer a loss of self-esteem and would be stigmatized by other workers, if it were generally known that they were participating in a 'literacy' programme. Seen from a less charitable perspective, of course, the greatest risk of naming programmes 'literacy' programmes, as many of the early promoters of such programmes discovered, is that workers will simply not agree to participate. For, in terms of the welfare of workers, by far the greatest threat is that of being stigmatized by their employers—who are not among those kept in the dark.

The issue of how to name workplace literacy programmes so that workers will not be reluctant to participate is a theme common to the literature on workplace literacy on both sides of the Atlantic (see, for example, Calamai, 1987; Nieduszynska, 1992;

Frank, 1990). Conferences and meetings of workplace literacy 'practitioners' reiterate the necessity of taking care not to use the language of 'literacy' (or even, in some cases, 'basic education') to describe such programmes to workers. Indeed, the use of 'basic skills' as a descriptor for such programmes has gained currency precisely for this reason.

The above-cited example of worker/participants in the North West England programme who discovered they were in a 'literacy' programme when they read a newspaper account —an account, incidently, which celebrated the programme deliverers for the usefulness of their work and the company for its progressiveness—illustrates the folly of this fundamentally inexcusable duplicity. In that example, neither the deliverer nor the company would have been surprised by the newspaper account; for it was not inconsistent with their own views of what they were doing. Only the workers had been operating without a full knowledge of the context in which their programme had been promoted (by the deliverers and the union representatives), accepted (by the employer) and publicized in the broader community. Had they had this knowledge earlier, many (if not all) would very likely have rejected the invitation to participate—a decision which they would have taken based on reasonable concern for both their reputations and their job security.

'Recruiting' workers to workplace literacy programmes In spite of what may be characterized in many instances as extreme efforts to persuade them to participate in workplace literacy/basic skills programmes, workers have frequently been no more enthusiastic about joining such programmes than employers have been about sponsoring them. As a 1992 report on a number of Canadian case studies noted, for example,

"Notwithstanding the best efforts of management and labour working in a positive and cooperative manner, these cases ... illustrate the difficulties in recruiting employees into basic skills programs. Only about 3 percent of the employee population can be convinced of the value in upgrading their basic skills when the best available evidence suggests that nearly ten times that number have a basic skills problem" (Conference Board of Canada, 1992:7-8).

This evident lack of interest on the part of workers has not been interpreted by promoters of workplace literacy programmes as an indication that the programmes may be either unnecessary or problematic, however. On the contrary, it has been seen in most cases as demonstrating the need for more aggressive recruitment strategies. One such strategy, for example, has been for shop stewards to enrol in programmes themselves in order to remove workers' concerns about stigmatization and job insecurity (see Hikes, 1991). Indeed, the role of persuader is among the primary functions envisaged for trades unions in much of the workplace literacy literature. In a national U.S. publication on the subject, for example, it is advised that in promoting workplace literacy programmes, "employee representatives should be enlisted to spread the word that the program will not jeopardize anyone's employment status" (Carnevale, Gainer and Meltzer, 1991:173).

A report on the issue of worker recruitment in a Canadian labour-run workplace literacy initiative's 'instructor newsletter' attests to the proselytizing (and fundamentally coercive) nature of some recruitment strategies (BEST, 1989). Entitled 'The Recruitment Challenge', the article described the efforts of one volunteer (worker) instructor. When workers did not come forward at work to join the programme, it was

reported, the would-be instructor "finally took the step to visit potential participants at home. Four people made commitments" (ibid:unnumbered). In another example cited in the same article, only two (of 1500 unionized workers) had come forward after three months of recruitment. The instructor/recruiter, the article noted, "had no support from management and all recruitment is done outside work time. He knows that members in his union need the program." The newsletter asked readers whether they had "any suggestions" for their colleague. "What worked for you?", it asked. "Let us hear your recruitment story."

Indeed, in some cases in Canada—as in the United States—workers have evidently not been given the choice of voluntarily coming forward. This is implicit in a rather horrifying account given by the workplace training coordinator of a Canadian voluntary agency, for example (McIntyre, 1991:Appendix E). She noted that one of the services her organization offered was helping "concerned employers deal with the inevitable emotional problems workers may feel when *confronted* with their illiteracy"[4] (emphasis added). "For workers to come forward to a superior and admit their illiteracy," she observed, "is terrifying. They're always, always ashamed of it" (ibid).

General standard of provision is low "Employees have *risked disclosing their needs*, and they are counting on help in addressing them." These are the words of a company human resources supervisor in Saskatchewan, Canada (Barclay, 1990:11, emphasis added); her comment was in reference to a report on a basic skills assessment of workers conducted by the provincial federation of labour. Contained in the comment

[4] Presumably that 'illiteracy' would have been revealed through an assessment conducted by her organization.

is the very crux of the workforce literacy issue. Workers clearly do take a risk when they participate in basic skills/literacy assessments and/or when they admit to the need for literacy/basic skills tuition; and employers are, as in this case, typically quite willing to acknowledge this risk. But, do the programmes which are offered in response to the alleged or admitted need have the potential to address the need meaningfully? Can such programmes make 'illiterate' workers 'literate' or can they even correct 'basic skills deficiencies'? In other words, can workers assessed as having literacy deficiencies recover their status and/or their reputations in the workplace through participating in workplace literacy/basic skills programmes?

What the company would do, in this Saskatchewan case, would be to request the federation of labour to establish its union-run basic education programme in up to four selected worksites across the province. As the human resources manager observed, since the union model was based on utilizing local employees in a volunteer capacity as instructors, it would offer "expertise and programming to the organization *at minimal cost*" (ibid, emphasis added). The workers who had 'risked disclosing their needs' would, in fact, be offered four hours of instruction a week for around 36 weeks (approximately 140 hours) by a fellow worker who had had two weeks of training (provided by the federation of labour) in preparation for becoming a literacy/English as a Second Language instructor. In this case, by union agreement, many workers would participate totally on their own time. The cost to the company for running the programme province-wide for one year would be around two thousand dollars—in contrast to its total training and development budget for the same year of $1.092 million (Conference Board of Canada, 1992, Appendix vii:5).

This particular Saskatchewan programme has become one of a few 'model' workplace literacy programmes in Canada, featured in a number of publications on workplace literacy and training (see, for example, Barclay, 1990; Taylor, 1993; Stinson O'Gorman, 1996; Conference Board of Canada, 1992). What this serves to underline, of course, is that the standard for workplace literacy programmes in Canada is, in fact, very low.

As the above discussion of the Massachusetts state workplace literacy initiative indicates, however, Canada is not unique in tolerating (even celebrating) a low standard for the provision of programmes for workers deemed 'illiterate' or 'basic skills deficient'. For, although several reports on the Massachusetts initiative have revealed serious problems—many of them a direct consequence of the state's conscious decision to minimize policies and regulations in respect of workplace literacy programmes—the Massachusetts approach was widely promoted in both the United States and Canada as a model for others to follow. Similarly, the programme in the North West England heating plant—referred to several times in preceding sections to illustrate the problem-atic nature of workplace literacy programmes—has actually been among England's 'flagship' programmes (Hamilton, et al., 1991). It has been profiled by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (Taw, 1990) and featured in the national press (Williams, 1990). And company managers, shop stewards and programme participants have shared platforms with national CBI and TUC leaders (Hamilton et al, 1991:3).

Duration of programmes is unrealistic Although there are differences between approaches to workplace literacy programming on either side of the Atlantic, and considerable variation within North America itself, there are a number of features

which are common to all. The most central of these common features, and one which renders the overwhelming majority of programmes classed as 'literacy' or 'basic skills' incapable of fulfilling their implicit mandate, is the duration of instruction. For, although these programmes are generally premised on the assumption of significant basic skills deficiencies, many offer only a few hours of instruction—in some cases as little as eight or ten hours. One to two hundred hours of instruction, over a period of a year or more, is considered to be an intensive programme. Workers with genuine literacy problems would not make significant gains even with 'intensive' instruction, defined in this way. Indeed, it is common in both public and voluntary adult literacy education for students to spend several years in part-time study. State-funded full-time programmes in adult upgrading—such as Canada's federally supported programmes, for example—generally provide for 52 weeks (or 1300 hours) of instruction for those who *do not* have literacy problems. Where adults with literacy difficulties are accepted into federally sponsored programmes, the duration of programming may be two or three times that.[5]

In general, given the limited duration of instruction, workplace literacy programmes tend to set entirely unrealistic goals for workers to achieve. For, while a 30 or 100 hour course might be sufficient for training focused on a particular aspect of work or the workplace, those who promote and deliver workplace literacy programmes base their claims to expertise not on the content of jobs but on what they claim are the generic 'abstracted' components (or the literacy competencies) of all job skills. And

[5] In the case of programmes for workers displaced from the fishery in Newfoundland in the early 1990s, for example, those who participated in public college literacy programmes were typically sponsored for two or more years of full-time tuition.

this—not specific job techniques or processes—is what they presume to teach in a discrete and typically very limited block of time.

In some cases, the approach taken is traditional and essentially academic. A common 'basic skills' course outline, for example, might include brief lessons on standard English grammar and punctuation, report and letter writing, form filling, interview and oral presentation techniques, and so forth. Time limitations generally mean that each such topic can barely be introduced before students have to go on to the next.

Approaches to programming: increasing privileging of employer's role A fairly conventional academic approach—typically described as 'communications' or 'foundation' courses—has characterized the majority of workplace literacy programming in England and it has also been widely used in North American workplace literacy programmes delivered in public sector workplaces by educationalists from public institutions. Increasingly, however, as workplace literacy has been marketed in the private sector, programme providers have tended to see their role primarily as deliverers of the employer's curriculum. This has actually been dictated by the funders in many instances. As already noted, for example, the U.S. federal government's sponsorship of workplace literacy through the National Workplace Literacy Programme has stipulated that programme content be derived directly from the literacy requirements of participants' jobs. But the direct tailoring of so-called 'literacy' or 'basic skills' programme content to fit the employer's agenda has also been undertaken voluntarily by many programme providers as a means of making their programmes

more attractive to employers and, thus, securing a longer term commitment to their service.

In a thoughtful account of his experience as director of a workplace literacy initiative in Milton Keynes (England), Martin Robb expressed concern about "what happens to the 'content' of literacy provision when schemes are forced to 'sell' themselves to employers" (Robb, 1992:55). He noted that those involved in the Milton Keynes initiative had, inevitably, found themselves "soft-pedalling on notions of empowerment and self-expression when talking to employers, and starting to talk in terms of increased productivity and harmonious labour relations, at the same time as focusing attention on the rather narrow set of skills required in the workplace: reading safety notices, filling in pay claims and so forth." He observed that, in his experience, it was not long before "the rhetoric begins to determine the reality of provision" (ibid). "In education, as elsewhere," he noted, "he who pays the piper calls the tune. In this case, the customer is no longer the individual student, with his or her broad range of needs and interests, but is rather the student's employer, whose priorities are inevitably of a different order" (ibid). There is, in fact, substantial evidence that programmes do get shaped to meet the specific needs of the employer—though usually with less soul searching than that expressed by Robb. As already noted, for example, the programme in the North West England heating plant eventually came to be geared to the objectives of the 'Total Quality Management' initiative and the work of the 'Continuous Improvement Teams'—with the full support of the unions (Bootle and Rowley, 1992). And references to 'clients' in Workbase Training's literature in recent years are references to employers, not programme participants. A representative of Workbase Training,

Rose Taw, explicitly acknowledged the shift from its origins as a trades union programme in an account of the organization for a Canadian publication. "The recognition is growing", she stated, "that it is the managers who are the clients, rather than the employees" (Taw, 1991: 361).

Among the most extreme examples of the tailoring of workplace literacy programmes to the requirements of participants' jobs are those programmes targeted at workers with limited English proficiency. This has been particularly so in the United States where English as a Second Language constitutes a significant proportion of all workplace literacy programming.[6] Sondra Stein, one of the key organizers of the Massachusetts workplace literacy initiative clearly endorsed the productivity-centred function of the language programmes sponsored under the state's initiative. Describing one such programme, she noted that, although the teachers "felt impelled" to include improved participant use of English among their measures of success, the supervisor's assessment of programme impact was focused more on changes in workplace participation (1991:21-22). She cited the example of a student who, as a result of participating in a workplace English programme, became an active contributor to the company's 'Valued Ideas' programme ("contributing several ideas for improving her work that were successfully implemented for cost-savings") and played a more constructive role in several problem-solving teams. Stein asked rhetorically whether it was important, or even relevant, that this worker "persisted in speaking her native Italian on the shop

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[6] In some states a majority of programmes classified as workplace literacy are language training programs for workers (both foreign and native born) with limited English proficiency. For example, of sixteen active programmes operating under the Massachusetts Workplace Education Programme in 1989, eleven were English as a Second Langauge programmes (Hikes, 1989). A study of a sample of programmes funded under the federal National Workplace Literacy Programme (Schultz, 1992:3) found that more than 50 percent included English as a Second Language.

floor". The advisory board to the programme had, she noted, "little by little" come to the realization that "English proficiency was an inadequate proxy for what the company really was looking for: increased participation" (ibid:22).

When it is considered that workplace literacy programmes in Massachusetts (as elsewhere in the United States and Canada in this period) provided one of a very few opportunities for adults in need of English language instruction, the full implications of this conclusion may be recognized. One employer who ran a workplace English programme under the Massachusetts state initiative, for example, observed that offering the programme had solved his problems with recruiting and retaining workers; the programme provided an incentive for employees to stay with his company (presumably neither the conditions nor the benefits of the job did) and members of the local Hispanic community began to apply for work at his plant in order to get an opportunity to learn English. (Sperazi, 1991:97).

U.S. trades unions have also seen the provision of English language classes—in the virtual absence of public provision of this service[7]—as an aid to their organizing objectives[8] (see, for example, Collins et al., 1989; Sarmiento and Kay, 1990). This has not necessarily translated into a commitment to teaching English for daily life or citizenship, or even union membership, however. The approach of a New York-based

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[7] BCEL reported in 1987 that up to 40,000 would be turned away from language classes in Los Angeles in that year. It also reported that there were 6,000 on waiting lists for English language programmes in New York City and "substantially larger numbers may have been 'lost' because most provider groups don't bother or aren't able to maintain wait lists" (BCEL, No. 10, January 1987:1) In the same period, several states (including California with among the highest proportion of immigrants in the country) passed "English only" laws, thus eliminating the use of other languages in the delivery of public services (ibid).

[8] The value of 'basic skills' programmes to organizing was also explicitly identified as a reason for trades unions to be involved in the delivery of such programmes at a June 1997 national conference on training hosted by the Canadian Labour Congress.

labour consortium to its workplace literacy initiative illustrates this well. For, although the labour-run initiative was funded out of the state's general Adult Basic Education fund, its approach was strictly workplace oriented. An article describing the initiative (Collins et al, 1989) noted that what the programmes run by the consortium had in common was that they provided not "*worker* literacy" (which vocational training, diploma and degree programmes, and 'generic literacy training' provide), but "*workplace* literacy" (1989:457, emphasis in original). In one example of the distinction, the authors note that learning "generic English" is not necessary (or necessarily helpful) in the workplace context, since workplace writing "often violates traditional academic rules and standards." To illustrate the point, they give the example of advertising copy which includes "single words, incomplete sentences, and puns", and technical manuals which "frequently omit definite articles, and depend on diagrams to provide a context for language, as do computer printouts, forms, flyers, and invoices". Job performance, the authors conclude, "is more likely to be improved by approaches that are specifically related to the job than by generic literacy training" (ibid).

Ironically, this article is entitled 'So We Can Use Our Own Names and Write the Laws by Which We Live: Educating the New U.S. Labor Force'. The title refers to the plight of 'illegal alien' workers in the United States. In fact, in this period so-called illegal aliens who had been resident in the United States from 1981 were given a possibility of gaining citizenship status (under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act), provided they could meet certain criteria. The most significant of these criteria was that they speak, read and write English well enough to pass a federally mandated examination focused, in part, on U.S. history and government (BCEL, No.

15, April 1988:3). A National Executive Forum convened to discuss the Act reported that the series of texts which formed the basis of the knowledge tests were grammatically, culturally and conceptually inaccessible to the majority of limited-English-speaking applicants (ibid). Clearly, learning to speak and read the language of advertising copy and technical manuals (and being spared the 'irrelevance' of definite articles) was not going to help the New York workers attain 'legalization'. Since the 1986 Act also imposed strict penalties on employers who continued to hire undocumented workers, the use of public funds by the New York labour consortium for its very dubious 'workplace literacy' programme was particularly questionable.

Justifying the need for the service: inventing a job-linked need for literacy Although workplace literacy programmes are typically instituted on the assumption that participants' jobs require greater literacy competencies than workers themselves possess, there is considerable evidence that many such programmes are themselves the only 'literacy content' in participants' working lives. The following comment from a student evaluation of an English workplace literacy programme powerfully illustrates this: "It [the time spent in the programme] is the only time in the week that I use my intellect" (quoted in Nieduszynska, 1992:2).

Workplace literacy programmes—in order to justify their own existence—have generally tended to inflate (and, in many cases, invent) the literacy content of participants' work. In many instances, literacy requirements are artificially imposed on the job or the production process itself. As Chapter 5 discussed, for example, the job of automotive mechanic has been deemed by workplace literacy 'experts' to entail reading and remembering thousands of pages of highly technical language. Many of

the claims for workplace literacy needs are based on the assumption that written instructions will be the primary source of information about how a job is to be done and that, where technical manuals exist, all work processes will be strictly based on such manuals. Indeed, as Gowen's (1992) study of a workplace literacy programme in a southern U.S. hospital illustrates, in some cases written instructions for work processes have been developed expressly to inject a literacy component into work after the establishment of a workplace literacy programme. In the case which Gowen documented, conflict developed between management and the workers who were expected not only to read the newly encoded work guidelines, but to reorient their working practices in conformity with those guidelines—guidelines which they felt unnecessarily complicated perfectly straightforward job processes.

The literacy task analysis takes the invention of a job literacy component beyond committing to print the supervisor's or consultant's idea of what a job entails. It actually professes to 'abstract' the generic literacy competencies from each job task in isolation. As noted, programmes funded under the U.S. National Workplace Literacy Programme generally use a 'literacy task analysis' process as the basis for programme planning and development. It is likely that the 'literacy task analysis', through presuming to define the literacy skills deemed necessary to the adequate completion of the various tasks of a job, has actually rendered many who perform their jobs perfectly satisfactorily appear to be unqualified. A 'literacy task analysis' of a truck driver's job provides an illustration of the potential for such a process to do this (Philippi, 1991). The task of inspecting the vehicle, prior to loading it and driving away, is broken down into six subtasks with a total of twenty-five 'literacy skill applications'

(1991:240). One of the subtasks, the 'cold check' involves the truck driver checking the oil, water, antifreeze, belts and hoses, and tires before starting the truck. This perfectly routine (and, one might assume, largely physical) operation is assigned three literacy skill applications: following sequential procedural directions, recognizing defects (i.e., compare/contrast; drawing conclusions) and knowledge of equipment operating procedures (i.e., cause/effect) (ibid). On the basis of such an analysis, commercial workbook material teaching the abstracted 'literacy skills' could legitimately become required learning material for a truck driver; importantly, the abstracted 'skills' could also become the basis of tests to evaluate workers' performance both in workplace literacy programmes and on the job.

Evaluating workers' performance in workplace literacy programmes: the gap between investments and expectations As was discussed above, the duration of workplace literacy programmes is generally far too short for participants to achieve meaningful change in their literacy competencies. Yet, even if courses were extended significantly, there are a number of other issues which would render many programmes of dubious value to workers. In both Canada and the United States, for example, much workplace literacy programming is provided by minimally trained volunteers. And, indeed, even where programmes are taught by paid educationalists from public educational institutions, they are frequently prevented from bringing what they know about adult basic education to the workplace. As Stein has noted of the Massachusetts state workplace initiative, for example, one of their objectives was "to use this initiative as a way of shaking our provider network [colleges, schools, community literacy programmes] out of doing what they had always done" (undated:18). The state

guidelines for workplace education, she observed, required that providers "engage with ... employers and unions ... in defining the goals of their programs" and actually discouraged them from "using traditional assessment tools and curricula" (ibid).

In their zeal to carve out this new territory, many workplace literacy providers have evidently abandoned many of the standards they might otherwise apply to the delivery of education. Reports on workplace literacy programmes reveal that, in many cases, providers agree to organize programmes even where the employer is clearly not sufficiently committed to create the conditions for the programme to be conducted properly. In one instance, for example, college staff began classes at midnight to accommodate workers changing shift schedules (BCEL, No. 24, July 1990). And, in New York City, a Local of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) offered classes at work sites around the metropolitan area to accommodate work shifts of its members. A report on the SEIU programme noted approvingly that "Workers may attend morning classes after working the night shift, or go to school in the evenings after working all day" (Colins et al, 1989:461).

Workplace literacy reports also provide numerous examples of the use of inappropriate facilities for programme delivery, as some of the examples cited earlier illustrate (see Hikes, 1989; Collins et al., 1989). In many cases, no space is assigned at all; teachers carry their flip charts, markers and other supplies and have to locate an available space each time a class is scheduled. Such was the case, for example, with a programme offered at a Canadian general hospital (Garlick-Griffin, 1993).

If we take the standards for the public provision of education and training as our guide, it is clear that many workplace literacy programmes are patently sub-standard.

They are also frequently below the standards normally observed for employer or union provided training. Yet workers who participate in such programmes are commonly evaluated as if they had participated in either well established and well supported education programmes or in quality workplace training. Those who market their workplace literacy programmes to employers typically promise a wide range of measurable results. Even the most general (and, therefore, least threatening) types of programme evaluation ask supervisors to monitor workers' performance for evidence of improvement (see, for example, Schultz, 1992; Evaluation Research, 1992). And, though programmes may be provided by minimally trained volunteers who do not require "specific knowledge", such programmes may, nevertheless, be evaluated through asking "superiors or co-workers (whether they have) noticed differences in the learner's job-related literacy skills or performance"[9] (Ioannou, et al, 1991:146). In many cases, workplace literacy providers have promoted the use of productivity studies as a means of assessing the benefits of their programme to the firm. Hikes noted in her review of the Massachusetts state workplace programme, for example, that one company was looking into the possibility of tracking the difference in hourly output pre and post-ESL classes (1991:326). Indeed, in some instances, employers have been led to believe that workplace literacy programmes could result in a decline in the number of grievances filed (see, for example, Sperazi, 1991).

Schultz's (1992) study of programmes funded under the U.S. National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP) found that most programmes which taught English as a

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[9] A U.S. federal government report on workplace literacy programmes noted that in one workplace education programme (Polaroid's much celebrated in-house 'basic skills' programme), instructors "check in" with the employee/student's supervisor "after *every 10 hours* of tutoring to determine whether there is skill transfer back to the job" (U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, 1988:21, emphasis added).

Second Language used standardized ESL testing before and after the programme to assess gains, even though workers were generally exposed to less than 120 hours of instruction. Instruction, in any case, tended to be directly job-based and, therefore, not related to the material on the standardized tests. In fact, standardized testing was used not only in ESL programmes but in nearly every NWLP programme in Schultz's study to monitor and document workers' progress. In spite of the fact that the NWLP itself prohibited the use of standard adult education curricula and mandated a strictly job-related programme content established through the 'literacy task analysis' process—and notwithstanding the very limited duration of programmes—participants were expected to make significant gains in reading levels as measured on standardized tests.[10]

Indeed, as already noted, the statute creating the U.S. National Workplace Literacy Program required a demonstrated impact on productivity in return for investment of federal funds (Evaluation Research, 1992). A report from a conference of project directors of the U.S. national programme included, among a number of methods for assessing workers' performance in the NWLP programmes, establishing productivity ratings, measuring employees' safety records, assessing employees' attitudes,

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[10] In fact, one objective of workplace literacy research in the United States has been to develop a teaching methodology which can achieve the greatest gains in reading level in the shortest possible time. Mikulecky and Lloyd, for example, reviewed the record of military programmes in respect of this. They determined that, on average, the best which might be achieved would be about .7 of a year gain in reading ability for 100-120 hours of instruction, which they contrasted favourably with the thousand (plus) hours which school children spend at one reading level (1992:5). They noted that, though the "most effective workplace literacy programs report reducing learning time to 50-70 hours of practice for a year of gain,...no program... has been able to consistently improve reading ability from low-level to high school or college standards in 20, 30 or even 50 hours"—and the standard training class in many industries is less than this (ibid). What becomes very clear from examining the work of workplace literacy 'experts' such as Mikulecky and Lloyd is that workplace literacy programmes have been under tremendous pressure to live up to the promises of their promoters and workers/participants have been caught in the middle of a patently misguided experiment.

and ("where the workers' abilities have a direct impact on company sales") measuring sales volumes (ibid:37-38).

ASSESSING THE POTENTIAL OF WORKPLACE LITERACY/BASIC SKILLS PROGRAMMES, CONCEIVING ALTERNATIVES

Recognizing the educational and training needs of workers with low formal qualification This and preceding chapters have argued that the problem of workforce educational achievement/literacy competency is both overstated and generally misrepresented. It has also been argued that recent attention to the putative problems, as well as programme initiatives and 'innovations' specifically targeted at workers with educational/literacy/language deficits, on the whole exacerbate the relative disadvantages of the less formally qualified both in the labour market and in their workplaces. This general critique should not, however, be interpreted as suggesting that there are not real educational and training needs among the workforce sections targeted by both the campaigns and the programmes; on the contrary.

There can be little doubt that many of those who did not attain adequate formal qualifications during their initial schooling aspire to do so as adults. The overwhelming response of British adults to invitations to come forward for tuition during the mid-1970s literacy campaign attests to the potential demand for adult basic education opportunities in that country (Hargreaves, 1980; Jones and Charnley, undated). Similar responses have greeted local and regional campaigning in Canada and, as Chapter 3 documented, excessive demand forced literacy programmes in several jurisdictions in the United States to close their doors to new applicants at the very outset of the renewed period of literacy campaigning in that country in the mid 1980s. That the

need for basic education services for adults is a real—and, indeed, a pressing—one is not disputed. And the need for language training services for minority language speakers as well as for many new immigrants and refugees is at least comparable to that for basic educational services—comparable both in the sense that there is a significant level of need as well as in the sense that, in both North America and England, it is a largely unmet need.

That many of those adults who identify basic education and language needs are currently in the workforce (both employed and unemployed) is also not disputed. Among part-time public adult basic education and English as a Second Language students, it is common to find a significant proportion of currently employed or job-seeking adults, many of whom have sought out and paid for these sparse and generally under-advertised programmes in spite of considerable constraints on both their time and their finances (for a discussion of adult basic education student makeup, see Longley, 1977; Hunter and Harman, 1979; Beder, 1991).

Evaluating the potential of workplace literacy programmes as a response to the needs of less formally qualified workers It must be acknowledged that, notwithstanding the very real shortcomings of the majority of existing workplace literacy and language programmes, many workers who voluntarily enrol in such programmes respond to them positively. Their reasons may be only tangentially related to the programme content or to the opportunities which the programme may afford for credentials or promotion, however. For many, the principal value of such programmes may lie in the fact that they offer a rare opportunity to relate in a meaningful way to co-workers. In some cases, the programmes also provide individuals whose pattern of daily activity is

normally dictated entirely by the needs of others[11] with a space in which they are able to concentrate, in some measure, on their own needs and interests.

But it is also undoubtedly true that, in many cases, workplace literacy/basic skills programmes do provide opportunities for workers to engage in meaningful learning activities. In the absence of other accessible educational or training alternatives (and there is a general dearth of learning opportunities for undereducated adults on both sides of the Atlantic) such programmes are occasionally (and justifiably) welcomed by both workers and their unions. This section examines the *potential* of workplace literacy/basic skill programmes as at least a part of the answer to the educational/training needs of workers with low levels of educational attainment or limited literacy/language competency. It does so through examining in some detail a 'best case' scenario, an adult basic skills programme which made up part of the English research for this study and which, in many respects, represents the best practice in existing workplace basic skills programmes in either of the three countries examined. The value of this programme as a test case of the viability of workplace basic skills programmes is that, while it represented a kind of 'cadillac' version of such programmes (rarely, if ever, entirely duplicated either in England or in North America), it also exhibited many problems and contradictions. The question which will be examined here is whether any or all of these problems and contradictions are inherent (and unavoidable) or whether they could be ameliorated—for example, through more constructive input from trades unions.

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[11] For many women, for example, the end of the working day with the employer simply marks the beginning of another working day at home.

The programme in question was run by a workplace basic skills private training agency for a local authority in London, England during May and June of 1992. I spent the final two days of the twelve-day programme as an observer; at times I assisted the teacher as well. The programme had been spread over six weeks, with two days of instruction each week. With twelve full days of instruction—all paid release time from work—this programme was more intensive than was typical of workplace literacy programmes. The participants were 'home helps', all female employees of the local authority, whose work it was to visit and care for elderly and disabled clients in their homes. Their work entailed visiting several clients a day, but the labour process was essentially solitary. Since the women did not share a workplace, the programme was, by necessity, held away from their normal work, meaning in this respect also it differed from the majority of workplace literacy/basic skills programmes. In this case, the venue was a properly equipped and reasonably pleasant meeting room at a conference centre.

At the time of my visit to the programme, the twelve women had already spent ten days together and had obviously established some degree of group identification. The atmosphere was relatively informal and quite friendly; the teachers (there were two for the programme and they alternated days) were both highly competent and congenial. The programme content over the six-week period was quite varied, ranging from study skills to job application forms to women's health issues. It had also included guest presentations on the union and the local authority's equal opportunities policy. On one of the two days I was there, I accompanied the students and teacher on a field trip to a local exhibition celebrating the life and accomplishments of a Jamaican nurse, Mary

Seacole, who had fought racial discrimination to serve England in the Crimean War. The majority of the women participants were black—of both African and West Indian origin—and it was clear that they found the story of Mary Seacole (and the fact that it was being celebrated) very affirming. Indeed, it was evident that they had gained much from the programme overall. At the social which marked the end of the programme, it was clear that most of the women would have happily chosen to continue, had they had the choice. Most would undoubtedly look back on the programme as a high point in their work life—a time when they were more than simply the isolated 'home helps', a group which their union advocate (Humphries, undated) had acknowledged were "at the bottom of the pile" of the local authority's Home Care Service.

In several key respects, as already noted, this programme represented the 'best practice' in workplace literacy/basic skills on either side of the Atlantic. Fully paid release time is not the norm for workplace literacy; indeed, it is not usual in either Canada or the United States for unions to even negotiate for full paid release for such programmes. Both teachers were experienced and well qualified, and both had obviously prepared well for this particular course. This differs markedly from much of the general practice in workplace literacy, and particularly from many of the North American models which utilize volunteer tutors with little or no teaching qualification and minimal preparation for the programmes they are undertaking. The venue was a regular meeting/training facility. By contrast, many (if not most) workplace literacy programmes have to find space where they can on the employer's premises; as already noted, all too often the available space provides neither the privacy nor the conditions

for optimal learning. The programme content was varied and frequently interesting, and the delivery format allowed for active discussion of topics which were either personally or occupationally relevant to all or most of the participants. Another feature of this programme which positively distinguished it from many such programmes—and perhaps the majority of North American programmes—was the involvement of the union. The trades unions had been involved in a local authority-wide training needs assessment which led to this particular programme being provided. The union which represented the home helps had been particularly supportive of the basic skills programme itself and the programme had, in fact, been agreed by the union/local authority Joint Works Committee. The worker/participants clearly understood that the programme was supported by their union; a union representative had visited the programme as a guest presenter and another joined the group for the end-of-programme social.

In spite of all of these positive features, however, several serious issues arose in my examination of the London programme for home helps. Some of these issues and problems related to the actual potential of the programme content to either improve participants' ability to do their current jobs or to enhance their potential for promotion and pay increase. Other issues related to the use which might be made of the programme by the local authority. The expectations which the programme established for participants (in terms of post-programme work performance) and the function of the programme in the local authority's 'human resources' management framework were both critical issues and, importantly, both were largely unrecognized by the participants.

The selection of a 'basic skills' training programme was problematic in itself, given the training time available. The problem lay not necessarily with the determination of literacy or language needs—there were clearly literacy and language difficulties among the participant group—but with the decision to use the twelve-day training period to address such an extensive and complex need. There was, in fact, a wide range of educational attainment and literacy and (English) language competency among the group of twelve. No one programme could have addressed their diverse literacy and language needs; and, indeed, no programme could aspire to make any significant change in fundamental competencies in such a short period even if the group had relatively comparable levels of ability and need. The 'literacy' or 'basic skill' component of the programme (which was its principal focus and its *raison d'être*) was, in fact, not particularly coherent; by necessity, it attempted to do more than could realistically be achieved in such a limited time. Participants were exposed to a smattering of material typical of 'Literacy' or 'Communications' courses. There had been brief lessons, for example, in grammar, spelling and punctuation; there had also been an introduction to filling in job applications and a practice job interview. In the time that I observed the group, I saw that a minority handled the material with ease and probably had no real need of such instruction; others had some difficulty but, given sufficient time, could have benefited from the type and level of instruction; several, however, were totally frustrated by the level of difficulty of the exercises. One person whom I sat next to and tried to assist, for example, struggled to understand the distinction between *there*, *their* and *they're*, although simply spelling either of these words correctly (without regard to correct usage) was well beyond her ability.

Although it might be argued that the exposure to such material was worthwhile in that it may have motivated some to continue in adult basic education programmes at the end of that course, it also seemed quite likely to have discouraged those whose needs were at an entirely different (and more fundamental) level than that addressed by the programme and whose experience with the 'communications' material was primarily frustration. In fact, the informal discussion among participants in the final two days of the programme seemed to confirm this. Those who had worked easily with the course material (a small minority of the twelve) indicated their intention to pursue further training in their own time with a view to attaining the formal qualifications they had not achieved in their initial schooling. Among those who had experienced less success (the majority), there was praise for the course they were finishing but no apparent intention to pursue further training along the same lines.

Evaluated in terms of the productive use of training time, this programme was less than successful. Had there been more effort put into deciding what could realistically be achieved in the twelve-day paid release training period, it is likely that quite a different programme would have been developed. Indeed, several possibilities suggested themselves to me as I listened to the women talk about their work. It was clear, for example, that there was a great deal of fear and anxiety among the group relating to the possibility that they would be faced with a medical emergency while they attended a client. Many of their clients lived alone and, given their age and state of health, the probability of a medical emergency was certainly not negligible; several of the participants expressed concern about their responsibility for assessing the level of risk as well as for handling the situation if they happened to be in attendance when

an emergency occurred. They had had no training in administering first aid, nor had they been given clear instructions for the procedure for summoning emergency medical assistance. Such training would have been entirely feasible in the twelve-day training period, with time to spare for other practical and manifestly necessary training. One other clearly expressed need, for example, was instruction in how to lift people without doing injury to themselves or to the person being lifted. Since many of their clients were physically disabled and since their job duties included assisting clients with bathing, getting in and out of bed, and going to the toilet, among other needs, it was clearly necessary for them to know how to lift people skilfully and safely; and although technically they were required to 'assist' rather than 'lift', as their discussion revealed, it was difficult to be 'technical' in a situation where an individual clearly needed lifting.

Their jobs were, in fact, quite complex—entailing three pages of job description enumerating a daunting list of duties including cooking, cleaning, shopping and paying bills, collecting pensions and prescriptions, advising on welfare rights and health and safety matters, and liaising with medical and social and community services agencies. Yet, in spite of such extensive duties and responsibilities—which were actually expanding at that time—the home helps had been given no training in preparation for their jobs (Humphries, undated). The range of duties—and the knowledge and skill requirements arising out of those duties—ought to have suggested a number of directly relevant and, indeed, essential training options. As I assessed the situation of the group of women attending this particular course, I concluded that, had a range of training options been properly considered—in terms of the priority of need as well as in terms

of the practical limitations of the time available—a 'basic skills' course such as the one they were presented with would not have been among the foremost choices.

In view of the nature of their jobs and the type of material presented in the basic skills programme, it was unlikely that the majority of participants actually gained much from the programme which would prove of practical value to their work. This was regrettable, since there were several practical (one might even say urgent) training needs which they had themselves identified. Yet, though regrettable, the missed opportunity to participate in more relevant and needed training was probably not the most serious aspect of the training option provided to these home helps. More significant, in terms of the probable impact on their working lives, was the fact that the training (or, more accurately, participants' performance in the training) was itself likely to be linked to a regrading of home helps for which plans were already being made at that time. Yet, though this could have quite important consequences for each of the participant's job security and future employment prospects, the gravity of the situation was very much downplayed by all those involved in the organization and delivery of the programme. The participants were encouraged to show their course work files to their managers at the end-of-programme social. Several of the participants would have been well advised against doing this, as they could have gained nothing from revealing weak or non-existent literacy skills. Yet this was encouraged with the evident support of the union representative who also attended the social. Though it was by no means clear that the literacy component of the work was changing—and, therefore, that the low-literate workers would be any less capable of doing the regraded work than they were able to do their current jobs—it seemed likely that their reading and writing

performance, as evidenced in their compiled work from the programme, would influence their opportunities for regrading and pay increase. In fact, at the social marking the end of a similar course offered to other Home Care Service staff of this local authority earlier in 1992, a representative of senior management had told the students that the "training was linked to their regrading [and] agreed by the Trades Unions".[12]

Equally problematic for the participants was the fact that the training agency's programme evaluation process required that each participant's manager/supervisor complete a report on the participant four weeks after the end of the course—a report based on observing the participant in the workplace, a 'debriefing session after the course', or a 'review' prior to completing the report. The report form asked the manager/supervisor to indicate whether the participant had displayed increased knowledge, understanding, or skills relevant to the job as a consequence of attending the programme and whether the participant's attitude had "developed in any way" since completing the course. Considering that the course itself provided little (if any) opportunity for the development of knowledge, understanding, or skills related to the job, both the reasonableness of such expectations and the legitimacy of the evaluation process were highly questionable.

It is clear from the identification of problems and issues attending this programme that, even when a basic skills programme appears in many respects to provide a high quality training opportunity—in this case, the programme was evaluated quite

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[12] Reported in *Evaluation of Lambeth Directorate of Social Services Report on Communications Skills Course 5, Home Care Staff.* Unpublished report. (Copy provided by representative of NUPE/Lambeth Joint Works Committee, June 18, 1992.)

positively by participants and the model endorsed by both the employer and the trades union—the question of whether or not it constitutes an unmixed benefit for workers remains doubtful. It might reasonably be asked whether many of the problems and issues enumerated in the foregoing pages are not mitigated by the presence of a union or unions, and whether it is not possible for trades unions to influence the development of workplace literacy/basic skills provision in a way which makes it a goal worth pursuing. The next section addresses this question, beginning with an examination of the role of the trades union in the London programme itself and moving from there to consider the role(s) which trades unions have played in the promotion, organization and delivery of workplace literacy/basic skills programmes in both England and North America.

Trades unions' role in workplace literacy/basic skills: a mitigating influence? There were essentially two problematic features of the London basic skills programme discussed above. The first was the selection of the 'basic skills' programme itself—presumably from a range of training options. The second was the function of the programme in the local authority's human resource planning and, specifically, the issue of whether managers may have used their knowledge of participants' performance in the programme as the basis for employment decisions.

With respect to the first issue, the selection of a basic skills programme as the training option for home helps, the role of the union had been significant—indeed, probably central, although this was not documented. The focus on opportunities for home helps in that particular local authority had been, in part, a response to internal pressure within their union, the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). NUPE

had been pressed to seek training opportunities for home helps in preparation for anticipated changes in their jobs, as the national government's Care in the Community Act (to be introduced in the following year) was expected to result in the deinstitution-alization of increasing numbers of individuals with various disabilities. Speaking to a motion on the issue at a NUPE Congress, a spokesperson for home helps had asked for a "full training program (sic) with upgrading at the end of it, ... which would in it's self (sic) bring a much deserved monetary reward" (Humphreys, undated).

The local authority itself had adopted an equal opportunities policy in that period and, in line with this policy direction, had undertaken to address the issue of access to training opportunities for manual workers, of whom women and minorities constituted a significant proportion. A 1990-91 survey of manual worker training needs conducted by the local authority, with significant input from the trades unions, had identified a "relatively high level of need (23%) ... for Basic Level Literacy and Numeracy training" (Quan, Burtenshaw and Straker, 1991:2). Although the demand for Health and Safety and First Aid was considerably higher at 59% and 67% respectively (ibid), it may be assumed that the finding of 'basic literacy and numeracy' need influenced the decision to invite a basic skills training agency to conduct its own needs assessment of home helps and deliver the basic skills programme. And, indeed, as already noted, literacy and language difficulties were clearly evident among the group of twelve women who attended the basic skills programme in question. Notwithstanding this, however, the choice of the basic skills course raises questions about the sensitivity of the union to either the *priority* training needs of its members in this case, or the appropriateness of such a programme (given its considerable limitations) to address the

actual basic skills needs of this group. It would seem likely that the decision to opt for basic skills training was influenced by factors other than a close consideration of the best options for this particular group. NUPE's historic association with (and continuing support for) the basic skills agency engaged, for example, very likely played a role in the selection of this particular type of training for the home helps. This is not to imply that the training was selected in order to favour the agency but, rather, that the association with this agency (NUPE was represented on the management board) meant that the union also supported the arguments of the 'basic skills' lobby and the general promotion of workplace basic skills programmes.

Whatever the combination of reasons for choosing such a programme, it clearly fell short of the call at the union congress by the home helps' advocate for a "full training program(me) with upgrading at the end of it" and a "much deserved monetary reward". On the contrary, for several of the women who attended, the programme could have done little more than reveal personal deficiencies—and those not necessarily related to their ability to perform the duties of their jobs. The programme itself could do little, if anything, to address the deficiencies. Nor, as already noted, did it address their immediate informational and training needs—needs which they were clearly able to express and many of which could have been addressed adequately within the time and resources available.

With respect to the second issue—that of the use to which the workers' performance in the programme may have been put by managers—the union's role in the case of the London programme was more obviously problematic. Similarly, the training agency's use of an evaluation process which established management expectations of the

programme largely (if not entirely) unrelated to the actual content of the programme created a potentially threatening situation for the worker/participants. The validity of supervisors' assessments of the worker/participants based on these expectations was highly questionable, even to a casual observer. Yet, when I raised the issue in an interview with the same union representative who had attended the end-of-programme social, there was no evident concern about possible negative impacts of the practice. He was, in fact, unable to say whether the assessments were included in participants' employee files or whether employment decisions were in any way based on the assessments.[13]

It may well be asked whether this example is not exceptional, whether this is simply a case of a union whose long association with a particular agency has created a situation where representatives are less vigilant than they might otherwise be. And, indeed, this may go some way towards explaining the apparent lack of caution on the part of the NUPE representatives in the London case. The evidence of the research conducted for this study, however, would suggest that NUPE is not unusual among unions in adopting an uncharacteristically casual approach to arrangements surrounding workplace literacy/basic skills programmes. In fact, as already noted, NUPE's interventions on behalf of the home helps in the London programme were demonstrably better than the majority of union interventions in basic skills programmes in several important respects. In terms of paid time off, facilities and resources, and programme quality, for example, these workers had evidently been exceptionally well represented.

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[13] Interview with NUPE representative, NUPE/Lambeth Joint Works Committee, June 18, 1992.

What the sum of the evidence on union responses to the worker literacy issue suggests is that the conduct of NUPE representatives in the case presented above was, on the whole, better than union interventions in respect of the needs of their undereducated members in general. But, importantly, this union's actions were also, in many respects, *typical* of union responses to their least influential members and, more generally, typical of societal responses to the so-called 'illiterate'. In North America, this has been more explicit as trades unions and labour federations have joined in local, regional and national literacy campaigns. As both Chapters 4 and 6 documented, spokespersons for trades unions, as well as the broader labour movement, have not hesitated to assert that illiteracy is pervasive among their membership. This, one must assume, is done in an attempt (however misguided) to call attention to the needs of their most disadvantaged—and least served—members, and to gain support for programmes to address their needs. The problem, of course, is that solutions to problems are invariably shaped by the manner in which the problems are defined. And defining workers' problems as 'illiteracy' not only sets the stage for a narrow approach to the types of training they are likely to receive; it also establishes a set of attitudes towards those workers—attitudes which are, at base, patronizing. For, just as those assumed to have literacy problems are stereotyped by the media and the general public, so they are by unions—leadership and rank and file members alike. One typical manifestation of this is the assumption that workers with any degree of literacy (or language) difficulty are incapable of participating in job-related training without first becoming 'literate'. The fact that they are quite capable of doing their jobs—and a significant proportion of those with low levels of literacy or limited English (French)

proficiency may have experience of several jobs—is overlooked. The most significant feature of those deemed 'illiterate' becomes their supposed illiteracy. Yet, while it may be true that workers with literacy and language difficulties would be likely to have problems with training programmes which relied primarily on print-based instruction, this would depend very much on the particular level of their ability as well as on the level of difficulty of the print material used. Training programmes which utilized active instruction and practical applications would, in most cases, present no more difficulty for the low literate individual than for many others. Affirmative action/equal opportunities measures to ensure that manual workers and minorities have greater access to training would arguably be better pursued through union interventions to curb the growing use of low-cost training programmes by employers, training agencies and institutions (both public and private) and, indeed, by unions themselves. A reliance on print-based instruction over practical demonstration, the substitution of computers and videos for trainers, the growth of the learning centre where workers 'plug in' on their own time—all of these are measures which reduce the costs of training but also limit meaningful access to training programmes.

There are many problems with the current approaches of unions to workers' literacy and language needs. One of the main problems, ironically, is that workers deemed illiterate are frequently singled out for special treatment—but all too often this 'special' treatment turns out to be less. The examples of two Canadian unions' approaches to the needs of the low literate illustrate the problem particularly well. The first case is that of the union representing fisheries workers in the province of Newfoundland—the Fish, Food and Allied Workers/Canadian Auto Workers Union. When the Canadian

government announced a moratorium on the cod fishery off the Atlantic coast in 1992, more than 20,000 workers involved in the harvesting and processing of cod in Newfoundland were thrown out of work. A compensation programme was instituted, but one which obliged the displaced workers to participate in training programmes as a condition of receiving income support. The union successfully lobbied both the provincial and federal governments for grant funding to become one of the organizations to deliver this training. Union education centres were established in several regions of the province, in direct competition with the public community college system. Fully 72 percent of the displaced workers in receipt of income support had not achieved a high school graduation and more than 40 percent had a level of educational attainment which suggested probable literacy deficits (Quinlan and Hynes, 1996:10). Yet the union selected as a primary method of instruction a computerized adult basic education package which required independent study and well developed literacy skills. Displaced workers were screened for acceptance into the union education centre programmes through the use of a standardized reading test. The union's director of education was a member of the provincial literacy coalition which was at that time engaged in an intensive literacy campaign; the union decided that, for those members who failed to make the grade on the standardized test, volunteer tutoring by members of the general community would be the answer. A literacy volunteer organization was contracted to conduct tutor training programmes in the areas served by the union education centres but, in the interests of privacy (the supposed 'illiterate' members were assumed to be embarrassed and to prefer to remain anonymous), the education centres took no responsibility for organizing the actual

tutoring. Since there was no record of any tutoring which may have taken place, the extent to which those excluded from the education centres used the services of volunteer tutors remains unknown.[14] The implications of the arrangement for displaced fisheries workers targeted as illiterate were enormous, since the union was at the same time pursuing the 'professionalization' of the Newfoundland fishery. Only those who had participated in training *in* and *for* the fishery while in receipt of the compensation package would be eligible to become 'professional' fishermen if and when the fishery reopened. All others would be excluded from any future fishery. For those who were also excluded by their union from the opportunity for formal upgrading, the prospects for future employment of any kind are particularly bleak.

Ironically, those displaced fisheries workers who attended the public college system to satisfy the training stipulation of the compensation arrangement would probably not have been subjected to the dual treatment based on educational attainment/literacy competency, since the community colleges (in the case of sponsored fisheries workers) generally provided adult basic education for all levels of proficiency. Those with the lowest literacy competencies were, in fact, allocated more resources as literacy level programmes had significantly lower student:teacher ratios and a higher level of spending on learning resources than did the higher levels of the adult basic education programme.

The other Canadian example is that of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), which has been referred to previously. The OFL programme enjoyed considerable

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[14] The likelihood, however, is that the extent of use was negligible as the report on the union training initiative at the time of its cessation barely mentioned it (Johnston, 1996).

support from the Ontario government from its inception in the late 1980s until the mid-1990s[15] and, as previously noted, trades unions in that province were given a virtual monopoly over both French and English 'basic skills' and second Language programmes for unionized workers. They have not, however, been permitted to deliver their programmes to ununionized workers. This has meant that workers who are unionized in Ontario are served by the union programmes while those who are not unionized would in most cases be served by public educational institutions; in the case of workplaces where only a portion of the workforce is unionized, union and public programmes may both operate—the former serving unionized workers, the latter serving the ununionized. The irony is that, while unionized workers are tutored by a fellow worker teaching in a volunteer capacity with minimal training, their ununionized counterparts may be taught by a well paid and fully trained professional teacher. And, while the one is involved in an informal programme with no possibility of a credential at the end—or of working towards a credential, the other may be working towards a formal credit, or even a high school equivalency certificate.[16] And, although the position of the OFL, as stated by its one-time director of education and the principal architect of its workplace basic skills model (Turk, 1992:6), is that "employed workers

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[15] The newly elected Conservative (and vehemently anti-union) government of Ontario announced in early 1997 that it would no longer fund the programme. The federal government is, however, more supportive and there is a strong movement in the Canadian Labour Congress itself to extend the programme model nationally. The likelihood that it will continue—and, in the current climate of devolution of training from the public systems, thrive—is quite high.

[16] In Canada, it is common for public educational institutions—when they are involved in workplace or worker-targeted basic skills programmes—to use their regular adult basic education programmes. Unlike in the United States, there is no government funding of workplace literacy programmes which actually prohibits them from doing this. From the workers' point of view, the practice has the advantage of providing access to the credentials of the public system; many employers have also shown a clear preference for such programmes over both the informal and *ad hoc*, job-centred alternatives.

should receive training entitlements at full pay", the OFL programme itself has done much to establish the model of half paid time/half workers' own time as the most achievable arrangement for unions to try and negotiate in the case of basic skills programmes. It has, in fact, become the starting point for most negotiations around time release for basic skills programmes in Canada, and in many cases (including programmes run by the OFL itself and its counterparts in other provinces) unions have agreed to deliver programmes with public funding entirely on workers' own time. In the case of the OFL model—now the Canadian Labour Congress model as well—negotiations over time also include that of the worker/instructors who are typically permitted to do half the tutoring on paid time, half on their own time, except in cases where no paid time is negotiated for either the participants or the tutor.

A further example of the failure of trades unions to provide progressive leadership on the issue of basic education for workers is provided by the case of trade union involvement in workplace education in New York City from the late 1980s. There, a consortium of trades unions, the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE), was able to capture all public funding for workplace literacy/basic skills education; although they had lobbied the state legislature for full control of programmes throughout the state, they were not successful and, in the rest of New York State, funding for workplace programmes went to a variety of agencies and organizations including, among others, community colleges and unions. The New York City case provides an important example of what may be lost when a service moves from the public to the private sector, perhaps even more particularly when the private sector provider is a union. Essentially, what happened in New York City was that public funds explicitly sup-

ported traditional labour market divisions based on ethnicity and gender, with unions representing (mostly female) immigrants and minorities providing a very different kind of programme than those which represented (mostly male) native-born Americans. A report on the CWE workplace education programme documented the trend (Collins et al, 1989). Unions which represented "predominantly non-English-speaking immigrants", it noted, were "developing curricula to suit the unique needs of their students. They encourage[d] students to learn basic literacy skills by writing about their own life experiences ... One programme produced a book of favorite recipes contributed from immigrant workers from all over the world; another, a book of essays about family life, illustrated with photos of the authors' families" (1989:460-461). The examples of unions providing such programmes betray the gender of the workers—if the description of the programmes had not already done so. They were the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (ACTWU). Another programme run by the ILGWU and the Garment Industry Development Corporation for displaced sewing machine operators functioned as a screening process with jobs going to those members who succeeded in the course (ibid:462).

As the article also reports, unions whose members were "primarily American-born", on the other hand, "use[d] curricula that prepare[d] their students for specific job promotion opportunities" (ibid:461). The examples given are a Local of the Teamsters, representing exterminating and heating-plant technology workers, which was offering job-related programmes to prepare its members to "pass civil service exams in these areas for employment by the New York City Housing Authority" and a Local of the

Communications Workers of America (CWA) representing "workers who could be eligible for supervisory positions in the city's work force". The CWA Local was providing its members with "problem-solving and computer skills to gain credentials and pass civil service exams" (ibid). Quite clearly, in the case of the New York City workplace education programme, the expenditure of public funds did not benefit from being controlled by trades unions. On the contrary; as imperfect as the American public education system may be, it is unlikely that differential services with such obvious race and gender biases would be tolerated in the New York City public adult education system in the current period. At the very least, elected officials could be held accountable. In this case, not only was the differential provision not recognized as a problem; it was positively celebrated as an example of the unions' sensitivity to the specific needs of their members and their ability to develop flexible curricula (Collins et al, 1989).

Assessing the position of trades unions on workplace literacy/basic skills To a certain extent, the position of trades unions on the issue of basic education for workers in North America has been prompted by self-serving motives. Unions and labour federations have not been inclined to resist when governments, intent on privatizing the service, have offered them a part of the funding and control. From the perspective of public policy and the general welfare of the working class, this has had serious consequences. For, not only is privatization of the service actually carried out in part by trades unions; the working class has also lost a potentially strong supporter of a properly funded public system of adult basic education and second language services, as unions find themselves unable both to participate in their privatization and to oppose

it. In their efforts to justify their right to do the work, the Canadian labour movement has also supported the trend towards deprofessionalization and deregulation of adult basic education. The entire Canadian Labour Congress approach to adult basic education and second language services for workers, for example, rests on the assumption that these services are best provided without either professional teachers or formal curricula. The position has been most emphatically stated by Jim Turk who, as Director of Education of the Ontario Federation of Labour, repeated in speech after speech through the late 1980s and early 1990s: "Anyone can be taught to read letters and words. That is not literacy in any meaningful sense." Co-workers, not teachers, he argued were best placed to understand the life experiences and needs of low literate workers and, thus, could (and should) be the teachers—of "meaningful" literacy[17] (see Turk, 1989). The statement betrays a shockingly cavalier attitude towards the thousands of adults who have experienced great difficulty learning to read and write proficiently. More seriously, considering that it comes from a person who had a major role in shaping public policy on basic education for workers in Canada's largest province—and, ultimately, in the whole of Canada—the statement also betrays a profound ignorance of the nature of adult illiteracy and the challenges which teaching low literate adults presents to the best prepared teachers. And although trades unionists such as the OFL's Turk couch their anti-teacher rhetoric in terms of union solidarity and 'empowerment', it is difficult not to view it more sceptically as the same kind of empire building which underlies North American volunteer literacy organizations' anti-

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[17] Another representative of the OFL programme observed that the fact that their instructors were not professional educationalists but "phone operators, waiters and waitresses, mechanics, cooks, bus drivers and factory workers" conveyed "an important message: workers collectively are able to meet their own needs" (Levine, 1990:135).

professional stance, explicitly stated in the slogan of the mid-1980s U.S. national campaign, 'The only degree you need is a degree of caring' (BCEL, No. 2, January 1995:2).

Whether union approaches to the issue of basic education for workers are based on organizational self-serving motives or on misunderstanding the nature of the problem, most union-organized or union-supported basic education initiatives are founded, to a greater or lesser degree, on a common misapprehension—the assumption that teaching an adult who has failed to read and write after years in the educational system, or teaching an individual a second language, is relatively much less demanding than any other educational or training endeavour. It is this same assumption which has formed the basis of much public policy on adult basic education in both North America and England over the past two decades—public policy which rests heavily on 'quick fixes' like the twelve-day or the 120-hour course, or the provision of the service by volunteers with minimal training. It is an assumption which flies in the face of the evidence; and its appeal lies largely in the fact that it supports a range of cheap solutions—solutions which arguably more closely reflect the marginal position of those in need of the service than the nature of their need.

The record of union involvement in workplace literacy/basic skills suggests that an increased role for unions in either the management or the delivery of programmes is unlikely to address many of the problems and issues which the provision of such programmes gives rise to. On the contrary, unless unions were to pursue involvement on radically different terms than they have to date, their role may actually exacerbate the situation for their own members as well as for the working class in general, as the

provision of adult basic education becomes increasingly removed from the public system and as what remains of the service is shaped by the workplace models. Quite clearly, there is a need for unions—and the labour movement in general—to confront the entire set of issues raised by the workforce literacy campaigns and the promotion of workplace literacy programmes. There are a number of fundamental questions on which unions have perhaps been too hasty in developing positions. One of the more important of these is the relationship between the issue of equity of access to training for all classifications of workers and access to literacy/basic skills and language programmes. It has been argued here that the two are not necessarily related; that it may be possible to pursue training opportunities for all workers, regardless of their literacy or language proficiencies. If it is possible for workers to do their jobs, it ought to be possible for them to participate in training programmes related to their jobs. To make literacy competency a determinant of access to all work-related training (even for those for whom it has not been a determinant of access to the job) is simply another form of the 'literacy imperative' at work. And, while it may appear more far-sighted on the part of trades unions to support programmes which purport to provide more fundamental (and, therefore, more marketable) skills, the real limitations which typify all employment training arrangements cannot be ignored. Workers are not better served if their scant training time is spent pursuing impossibly large objectives; the goal of access to education is not well served if standards of quality, equity and public accountability are sacrificed in the pursuit of an entirely circumscribed access for a few and if that access is won at the expense of *publicly* accessible systems.

If unions are to grapple with the issues presented here in a more constructive way, it will be necessary for them to recognize the distinction between access to training opportunities for workers and access to basic education and language services. With respect to the first of these—access to employment-based training—there are a number of problems which may arise for those with literacy or language difficulties, but which unions might well use their collective bargaining power to address. The literacy, print or language content of training, for example, is not a given. Virtually any training can be made more or less print/language intensive and it is generally for cost-cutting purposes rather than effectiveness that both job orientation and training have become increasingly reliant on print. Union-sponsored workplace basic skills programmes which attempt to teach workers with literacy problems to read the operating manuals for the equipment they operate[18] are not doing their members any favours. The success rate is likely to be marginal at best, and the price of failure might well be health and safety. Far better that unions should direct their resources and their influence at ensuring that workers receive adequate induction training through the most accessible methods and that the introduction of all new equipment is accompanied by appropriate training in its use. To offer to teach workers to read the operating manuals is to accept that employers do not have a responsibility to provide this essential training; in the end, it can only serve to entrench the increasing dominance of print-based, low-cost training (induction or otherwise) and the concomitant decrease in the use of training based on demonstration and practical application.

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[18] This, for example, is one of the goals of the programmes sponsored by the Quebec Federation of Labour (presentation by Louise Miller at the Canadian Labour Congress National Training Conference, Ottawa, June 1997).

With respect to the second set of issues raised by the workplace literacy/basic skills trend—access to basic education and language services for workers—organized labour will need to recognize that such services properly fall, along with other basic education services, within the domain of the welfare state. This means that appropriate trades union responses ought to concentrate, first, on influencing the development of state adult basic education provision so that it more adequately reflects the level and type of need as well as the potential demand and, secondly, on facilitating access to these state services for their members. The example of Italy's trades unions' efforts to secure basic education services for their members, initially undertaken in 1972 by the metalworkers' union, illustrates the potential for organized labour to influence public policy on adult basic education in just such a broadly progressive way. The strategy pursued by the metalworkers' union was to seek paid educational leave for all workers to be used for their own personal and cultural growth; they succeeded in negotiating for 150 hours of paid leave per person per three-year period, provided those granted such leave participated in a course of study for at least twice the duration of the paid leave period (Meghnagi, 1997:254-257). Training organized by the employer, as well as training related to the union, were excluded from the negotiated paid leave agreement; additional paid leave, not deducted from the 150 hours negotiated leave, had to be given for such training. One objective of the educational leave entitlement was to "overcome the stratification and hierarchisation of the labour force, the under-use of individual capacities and the lack of qualifications of a large number of workers" and, to facilitate this, the union made remedial education for its least educated members (those who had not completed lower secondary school) a top priority (ibid). Having

successfully negotiated the 150 hours paid leave, the union went on to negotiate with the government for the establishment of a programme in the state-funded school system which would make it possible for its members to achieve basic educational credentials. They succeeded in having authorities set up a programme of courses to be taught free of charge in state-funded schools with a recognized certificate at the end of the prescribed period of study. Other elements of the agreement included teachers paid by the state, a student-centred approach to teaching, and joint management and control of courses by unions and management (ibid).

What came to be known as the '150 hours policy' eventually featured in some form in nearly every collective bargaining agreement in Italy, spanning all employment sectors. As Meghnagi (1997:257) reports, "In practice, virtually all workers were covered". But, just as importantly, the unions' gains also benefited the working class in general as the courses established as a result of union negotiations, and initially in response to the demands of union members for paid leave, were also taken up by "casual labourers, unemployed people and housewives, whose access to education had been favoured by the unions' 150 hours initiative" (ibid). As Meghnagi observes, the "widespread use of the scheme throughout Italy and the diversity of participants' aspirations for social mobility and education transferred the 150 hours framework from an experiment concerned with workers' training to one which developed into general basic skills education for adults" (ibid).

Initiatives such as the 'Return to Learn' (R2L) programme, initiated in 1989 by the English public sector union, NUPE, offer a model for how unions might provide a 'bridge' to basic educational upgrading for their members without undermining public

education (Kennedy, 1995). Though targeting the same general classes of workers as workplace basic skills programmes tend to target (manual workers with low levels of formal qualification), the NUPE R2L programme was a union-owned programme which drew on the broader traditions of labour education. It combined individual tuition with study groups and residential weekends and its primary objective (as expressed in its name) was to increase members' confidence to take up other educational opportunities. The programme was presented (and evidently perceived) as an entitlement of union membership rather than as a response to member deficit. In contrast to the workplace-based courses, it was run entirely in workers' own time and did not bear any direct relation to their work or involve the employer in either authorizing participation, advising on content, or evaluating performance.[19] The English research for this study focused in some detail on the then NUPE-owned R2L programmes as they provided a quite different model for a way in which unions might respond to the issue of educational and training opportunities for their less formally qualified members. From my perspective as a participant/observer in one of the pilot R2L programmes, it was obvious that participants benefited from the fact that the programmes were independent from their workplace and their employer.[20] They

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[19] In 1996 UNISON, the amalgamated public sector union body which includes NUPE, extended the Return to Learn programme to include a number of externally funded union/employer partnerships. The sole union-controlled programmes, now referred to as 'internal R2L courses' continue to run as well. The union/employer partnership programmes have been favourably reviewed (Munro, Rainbird, Holly, 1997). The research for this study, however, was confined to the original NUPE-owned R2L programmes and no attempt has been made to evaluate the union/employer R2Ls.

[20] The R2L programme in which I participated was in the West Midlands, organized through the Birmingham Divisional Office of NUPE, and conducted by the West Midlands Workers' Educational Association. The period in which I participated was May to July, 1992. My involvement included attendance at a Weekend School as well as evening sessions (both in Birmingham) and meetings of the WEA tutors involved.

clearly enjoyed the opportunity for free and open discussion of political and social issues, an opportunity conspicuously absent from any of the workplace literacy/basic skills programmes observed. And though the union-owned programme did not aspire to take the place of basic education programmes (as many workplace basic skills programmes do), it actually provided an environment in which true education could take place—where intellectual enquiry and the free expression of opinion were not only possible but actively encouraged. The principal objectives of the R2L programmes at that time were to stimulate members' interest in taking up learning opportunities and to give them the confidence to do so, as well as to encourage more active membership in the union. Unlike the objectives of the majority of workplace basic skills programmes, these are probably achievable objectives and they fall well within the scope of trades unions' representational role. Such a programme would well complement a trades union movement, such as that of Italian unions, to secure state-provided learning opportunities appropriate to workers' needs, on the one hand, and the paid leave which would make it possible for workers to take up those opportunities, on the other.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an account of programmes variously designated 'workplace basic skills' and 'workplace literacy' in both North America and England. The account is presented, first, in terms of the extent of such programming and the general features of the range of existing programmes and, secondly, in terms of the issues and problems which have attended the establishment of workplace literacy/basic skills programmes.

As the chapter has documented, there are a number of distinctions which may be made among the three countries with respect to several aspects of the provision of workplace literacy/basic skills programmes, but there are also many important similarities. The second section of the chapter underlines the fact that there is perhaps more correspondence than difference—that, notwithstanding diverse organizational and programming arrangements, such programmes, wherever they are located, give rise to many of the same issues and problems for workers.

As has been documented in this chapter, one of the central features of workplace literacy programmes in all three countries is that they are generally not responses by employers to a perceived need for such programmes; nor can they be considered an indication that employers have been persuaded by the arguments of workforce literacy campaign messages or the arguments of those promoting workplace literacy programmes. Rather, the vast majority of workplace literacy activity in both North America and England has constituted little more than a promotional strategy on the part of the state—an attempt to get capital more extensively involved in the in-house provision of training for workers.

Because of the circumstances under which they have been supported, workplace literacy programmes, it has been argued, are fundamentally experimental programmes and promoters have had to use persuasion to recruit workers to them. Because of both their experimental nature and their function as 'promotional' gifts to employers, many errors have been committed at the expense of workers and many sub-standard practices have been not only tolerated but actually promoted.

This chapter has concluded that, on the whole, workplace literacy programmes are misconceived. In perhaps the majority of cases, it is doubtful whether workers make sufficient gains from their experience in the programmes to mitigate the negative impacts of being deemed to be in need of such programmes in the first place. Even where programmes are relatively well organized and workers express appreciation for them, it is unlikely that the workplace literacy or 'basic skills' programme is the most useful kind of training in which they could have participated. The reality in most cases, however, is that this is the only type of 'training' for low status workers—available only because of the presence of public funding.

As the final section of this chapter has documented, workplace literacy programmes have also presented major challenges for trades unions. The types of union involvement in existing programmes point to a general failure of unions on both sides of the Atlantic to either conceive an alternative approach which would resolve the range of issues and problems for workers or, indeed, to even grapple successfully with the problems as they present themselves in existing programmes. It has been argued here that nothing short of a fundamental rethinking of the entire issues of access to training for less qualified, low status workers and access to basic educational opportunities (for many of the same workers) is needed if unions are to provide appropriate representation on these issues.

As an indication of the potential for organized labour to influence the development of social policy and the provision of public services at the broadest level, the Italian example—which has been described in this chapter—is, indeed, inspiring. The direction pursued by the Italian unions, however, was in many respects the exact

opposite of the course which unions in both England and North America have chosen in the recent period. If similar, broadly progressive objectives are professed, then it is clear that a radical reevaluation of current positions will be required.

Chapter 8

Summary and Conclusions

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the question of how the 'literacy' competencies of significant sections of the workforces of North America and England have come to be seen as critically deficient—a cause of both company and national economic disadvantage—at a time when the general educational attainment levels of workers are higher than they have ever been. It also seeks to understand how wide consensus has been achieved on the issue of workforce literacy deficiency when a preponderance of evidence suggests that workers' literacy competencies are *underutilized* at work.

The examination of these two broad questions has proceeded from an historically informed analysis of the issue of working class 'illiteracy'. The thesis has explored the historical roots of current beliefs about literacy's impacts and, conversely, about the implications of *illiteracy* for both the individual and the general society. It has located the genesis of the use of the social category 'illiterate' in the context of the divergence between working class culture and the requirements of developing industrial capitalism, and the nineteenth century pursuit of capitalist hegemony through the promotion of a 'proper schooling' for all working class children. It has described the shift during the nineteenth century from the ruling class censure of working class literacy practices and educational endeavours to the imposition of a literacy *imperative*, the expectation that everyone should achieve a certain standard of literacy.

The use of the 'literacy imperative'—and of the social category 'illiterate'—has had a number of regressive functions historically and many of these functions continue into the present. As documented in Chapters 2 and 3, for example, the classification of individuals as 'illiterate' has been used to justify the curtailment of democratic rights, the use of discriminatory recruitment practices in employment, and the application of punitive measures against the unemployed. The identification of the targets of such discrimination as 'illiterate' has worked to conceal the class and race dimensions of the discrimination and the mythology of literacy—its assumed relation to social progress, democracy, and productivity, for example—has been invoked as a justification for the discriminatory action. The disenfranchisement of blacks or immigrants deemed to be illiterate is necessary to the very integrity of the democratic right which is denied; the compulsory subjection of illiterate prisoners to literacy programmes is an insurance against re-incarceration; the tying of eligibility for welfare to enrolment in literacy programmes 'empowers' illiterate welfare recipients to take control of their own lives and, thus, saves them from a lifetime of 'dependency'. All such measures are defended, and generally accepted by the majority, on the grounds that the temporary degradation of the individual 'illiterate' is a small price to pay for the individual and societal benefits to be reaped when the condition is banished.

This thesis has argued that the manipulation of the literacy imperative—through the continuous reinvention of the social category 'illiterate'—as a mechanism for the problematising of the working class remains among its primary functions. The categorization of large sections of the employed and unemployed working class as illiterate in the late twentieth century marks an essential continuity with the historical

uses of the category. In the current period, putative 'illiteracy' functions, as it has in the past, as an ostensibly neutral critique of workers—a critique which in this case may be seen to be largely centred on ethnicity and gender and more marginalized workers in general.

The Critique of Workforce Literacy Campaigns

Claims about the supposed 'literacy deficits' of significant sections of the workforce have been able to draw broad support in the current period, just as they have for more than a century, from what has been termed the 'mythology' of literacy—the overarching ideology which equates literacy with the full development of human cognitive potential and productive capacity as well as with progressive social, political and economic development. This thesis has argued that the generalized perception of workforce illiteracy as a significant social and economic problem in the late twentieth century is the product not only of this historical legacy, however, but also of an organized contemporary process of 'social construction'. The process of constructing worker illiteracy as a significant public issue in the 1980s and 1990s has involved a broad alliance including sections of both the state and corporate sectors, organized labour, educationalists and voluntary organizations. The process through which various sectors have taken up—or been drawn into—problematizing workers' literacy competencies and the broad material and ideological contexts in which the claims of widespread worker illiteracy have resonated have been described. Particular attention has been given to the contexts in which educationalists and organized labour chose not to oppose, but in large measure to support (indeed, in some cases, *to lead*) the movement

to establish workers' alleged literacy deficits as a priority concern for both employers and public policy makers.

The evidence presented here suggests that literacy campaigns in modern industrialized countries are not, as they are generally perceived, responses to new or newly manifested crises of adult illiteracy; nor do they seriously seek to improve access to educational opportunities for the undereducated. On the contrary; they typically increase the stigmatization of the so called 'illiterate' and promote low cost and low quality 'solutions' to the problem of undereducation. The most recent campaigns have also coincided with broader drives for reform of public education systems—reforms which in the long term invariably serve to exacerbate educational disparity and increase both the 'literacy gap' and the credentialling gap between those whom educational systems serve best and those whom they serve least. And they have also coincided with labour market conditions which favour or permit increased credentialism, selectivity and discrimination.

It has been argued here that the nature and conduct of the 1980s and 1990s workforce literacy campaigns have been, to a large extent, products of the political and economic contexts in which they have taken place. As argued in Part II of the thesis, neo-liberal economic policies, accompanied by New Right social and political reforms, have produced a climate in which the burden of blame for economic crisis and widespread job loss has been made to appear naturally to fall on the victims themselves. Continuing employment insecurity and the substantial diminution of social welfare protections against such insecurity have allowed capital to regain much of the ground which workers and their organizations had gained or consolidated in the post-

war period. Among those gains had been a degree of control over both the definition and the valuing of skills as well as labour input into processes for the acquisition of skills. During the 1980s and 1990s, substantially weakened labour organizations and workforces disciplined by the threat of recurring job losses have been ill-prepared to resist capital's moves to redefine and revalue skill in its own interests and to assess and reassess workers in the light of the new definitions and values.

Impacts on workers As Chapters 5 and 6 argued, one of the most transparent effects of recent workforce literacy campaigns has been the scapegoating function of the identification of a section of workers as 'illiterate'. The 'discovery' of widespread illiteracy among workers has pointed many analysts, particularly in the United States, to the source of a number of the most pressing industrial and economic problems of the late twentieth century. So-called illiterates, both in and out of the workforce, are held in large measure responsible for growing unemployment and poverty, as capital is purportedly forced to invest in labour-displacing technology or to move to other regions or countries in search of a better educated pool of workers. They are responsible for low and falling wages as, in the absence of the worker qualification necessary to 'upskill' work, employers are purportedly forced to 'dumb down' jobs and, consequently, pay lower wages. They are responsible for workplace accidents and the associated costs of productivity loss, health care bills and workers' compensation claims. And, most damning of all, in North America illiterate workers are directly implicated in the supposed loss of national pre-eminence in the world economy.

The function of a scapegoat, of course, is to shift attention from other possible causes or contributing factors. In the literature on workforce illiteracy—official,

academic and popular—there is little reference to the role of capital in any of the problems or trends identified. Management practices and decisions and capital investments are absent from the discourse; so are policies which result in job enlargement and labour intensification and put demands on workers for which they may well not be prepared; and so, too, are the industrial practices and public policies of deregulation which put profit maximization ahead of worker safety and environmental protection.

As Chapters 6 and 7 described, at the level of the workplace and the individual worker, the project to problematise worker literacy competencies and promote workplace basic skills programmes has embodied many contradictions. Workers assumed to have literacy problems have been presented, on the one hand, as the victims in a system which, by design, condemns some to a lifetime of unfulfilling work and low pay; on the other hand, they have been held to be responsible both for the existence of routine, unchallenging work and the low pay and benefits which accompany it and for industrial policies which replace them with machines and computers. Less formally educated workers are portrayed, on the one hand, as marginalized workers routinely denied necessary job-related training and internal labour market mobility; on the other hand, they are made to shoulder the blame for much of what is wrong with both their workplaces and the larger economy. Specially developed workplace 'literacy' or 'basic skills' programmes, though seriously limited in both duration and content and frequently of questionable educational merit, are held out as a panacea. If such programmes could be instituted in every workplace, their proponents claim, they would not only render low literate workers more productive in

their current jobs—and safer for themselves and their fellow workers—but would also enable them to progress through the employment hierarchy. In addition to the benefits to the individual worker, exaggerated claims are made about the potential for short, job-specific 'literacy' or 'basic skills' programmes to affect overall plant productivity and profitability, and ultimately, national competitiveness.

The diagnosis of widespread illiteracy among workers has been used to justify a variety of regressive policies and practices in the workplace. Many employers have responded to the alleged problem by demanding higher and higher entry qualifications. In North America where 'credential inflation' was identified as a problem more than twenty years ago, and where it has proceeded unabated since, this is particularly marked. High school graduation (minimally twelve years of schooling) is frequently required for jobs which require neither literacy nor skill. Employers have also responded to the supposed crisis of illiteracy by instituting unnecessarily demanding employee selection criteria, essentially designed not to eliminate the 'illiterate' from the competition (they are screened out by the application form itself), but to select for a range of other desired qualifications. In the United States, where legislation has provided some protection for employees against the misuse of testing by employers, the workforce illiteracy 'crisis' has created the basis for a whole new definition of 'relevance' or 'job-relatedness' in employer testing and, thus, for the extension of legally defensible testing. The use of the 'literacy task analysis' or 'job literacy audit', for example, both represent renewed opportunities for employers to define job related literacy skills in the widest possible sense.

Summary and Conclusions

An analysis of worker deficit/workforce quality as a central determinant of industrial planning has also supported an increasing trend towards a market-driven approach to education and workforce preparation programmes. This has had a number of direct consequences for public systems of education and training including increasing corporate influence over the organization and content of education and widespread privatization of both training and adult education. 'Literacy' or 'basic skills' programmes offered at the workplace and geared specifically to workplace requirements have been promoted as the optimal response to worker undereducation and the most appropriate employer or state initiative for a growing proportion of non-managerial workers. The involvement of employers (and, in some cases, trade unions) in the provision of basic educational upgrading, the tailoring of the aims of basic education to the specific needs of workplaces, and the concomitant shifting of responsibility for this area of education from the public to the private sector have been generally accepted without critique.

The evidence presented in Chapter 7 suggests that, in general, the provision of literacy or basic skills programmes in workplaces does not represent a gain for workers. The use of curricula directly related to the specific content of the worker's present job or to the objectives of new management strategies and workplace organizational practices, does not give workers skills which have currency in external labour markets. And, indeed, it seems likely that enrolment in, or selection for, workplace literacy programmes may actually serve to limit workers' prospects in internal labour markets.

Summary and Conclusions

Workplace literacy programmes are generally not formal programmes and are not formally recognized in the wage structure. Programmes are typically at such a low level that no meaningful qualification can result. It would appear that, far from supporting increased wages and benefits or increased opportunities for promotion, workplace literacy programmes have real potential to be used as little more than testing and sorting sites. The formulation of the problem as 'illiteracy', and the central role typically given to employers in defining essential 'literacy skills' of jobs as well as in defining the curricula of workplace literacy programmes, have meant an extension of employer prerogative into areas previously controlled by educationalists or trades unions. Many (and perhaps the majority) of workplace literacy programme models involve employers in the monitoring and evaluation of worker/student progress. Few programmes guarantee confidentiality and, even where unions are involved, there are frequently no protections built in for workers who fail to make progress. Many programmes set broad learning objectives, though they are typically expected to be achieved through extremely limited programme content. And all too often the measurement of progress is entirely unrelated to either the objectives or the content of the programme. Programmes using general reading curricula or teaching the 'abstracted' job skills generated through literacy task analyses may assess student progress through productivity measures, sales volumes or safety records. Entirely unrealistic expectations of participation in programmes mean that workers who participate are placed under constant review without the protections which would normally govern performance reviews.

RETHINKING THE ISSUES

There are two broad arenas in which the recent workforce literacy campaigns have found their most critical support—especially critical in the sense that they are also the obvious arenas from which credible opposition to the campaigns might have come. The first is the arena of adult basic education, where workplace literacy has been seen as a means through which a chronically undervalued and shrinking adult basic education service might gain new legitimacy and renewed financial support. The second is the arena of workforce training which has been seen by trades unions—in the context of declining union strength and diminished ability to secure wages and benefits gains for workers—as a promising domain for the extension of union activity. It has been seen both as an area in which some success might be achieved at the bargaining table and in which, as providers of training, trades unions might also expand their servicing role.

This thesis has concluded that both adult educationalists and trades unionists have been seriously misguided in their endorsement of the worker illiteracy issue and in their promotion of workplace literacy programmes. The campaigns to make a public issue of worker illiteracy, it has been argued, have worked entirely to the detriment of workers in general. Both the general campaigns and the promotion of workplace literacy programmes have also directly jeopardized the security of individual workers in their workplaces.

From the point of view of the direct instrumental objectives pursued by educationalists and trades unionists, the campaigns have also been demonstrably less than successful. The increased public financing of literacy programmes in the workplace

(much of which, in North America, has gone directly to trades unions) has proven to be short-lived. In the United States, for example, the National Workplace Literacy Program which, from 1988, provided federal funds directly to employers, trades unions, and educationalists was terminated in early 1997. And one of the most significant impacts of the period of campaigning which began in the United States in the early 1980s has been the substantial increase in private and volunteer provision of adult basic education. A very similar pattern has emerged in Canada, where public funding for adult basic education has been entirely eliminated in some provinces over the period of the literacy campaign; the role of the public sector in the delivery of programmes has been eclipsed by private and voluntary provision in the majority of provinces. Public funding for trades union provision of workplace literacy programmes has recently been curtailed in some provinces as well. In England, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit had its remit revised by central government in 1994; its focus is no longer on adult literacy but *basic skills* in general. The clear emphasis in the current period, as evidenced in the agency's newsletters subsequent to the changed remit, is on basic skills in schools.

In all three countries, the concept of adult literacy education has become considerably narrowed over the past two decades and direct preparation for employment generally or job-specific training is now defined as the goal of most adult literacy programmes. In North America, a sector of education which had begun to develop a body of theory and professional standards has been considerably deregulated and de-professionalised as a direct result of the recent literacy campaigns. This trend has been

actively supported by trades unionists who have, in some instances, implicated professional teachers directly in the production of 'illiteracy'.

The endorsement by both educationalists and trades unionists of short courses as an appropriate response to 'illiteracy' or so-called 'basic skills deficits' betrays a misunderstanding (either actual or willed) of the nature of adult illiteracy and adult undereducation. Courses of one to two hundred hours duration (and workplace programmes are typically much shorter) offer little opportunity for significant change in fundamental abilities. Furthermore, if workers are disadvantaged at the workplace because they lack educational credentials, then no amount of 'basic skills' tuition will ameliorate that disadvantage if it does not also provide formal and recognized credentials. Yet many of the workplace 'literacy' or 'basic skills' programmes which have received public funds are defined explicitly as alternatives to formal programme options which offer credentials. Even where literacy programmes offer credentials (as they generally now do in England, for example), a 'basic skills' credential runs the real risk of serving merely as a marker of low attainment.

For workers who have actual literacy problems, workplace literacy programmes can offer little, if any, benefit. And, considering that they frequently involve the administration of standardized reading tests (both pre- and post-programming), they generally entail a certain amount of anxiety and a considerable degree of risk. Adults who have completed several years of schooling but remain unable to read and write with reasonable facility frequently manifest significant learning problems and require the attention of well trained teachers and a variety of high quality learning resources.

Many have identifiable learning disabilities which may require the intervention of learning specialists.

Many who advocate workplace basic skills programmes assert that English (and, in Canada, French) as a Second Language programmes may present fewer problems than do programmes for allegedly 'illiterate' workers. It is generally acknowledged, for example, that there is less stigmatization of second language students than of literacy students in the workplace. However, there is good reason to question the value of language training in the workplace. If the need for such training is presented, as it typically is, in terms of workplace problems arising from lack of facility with the language, then the promotion of the programme automatically runs the risk of devaluing the worker in the employer's eyes. And, unless workplace language programmes can guarantee that workers' language facility will be improved to the extent that the workplace problems supposedly stemming from language difficulties will be solved, the worker continues to be at risk after the programme is finished. Considering that many workplace language programmes, like literacy programmes, entail very limited tuition by untrained volunteer tutors, it is unlikely that they are effective. Since such workplace programmes are frequently a substitute for publicly provided programmes of general language training, it must also be asked what has been traded for the 'convenience' and 'relevance' of workplace programming. The discussion in Chapter 7 indicates that workplace language programmes frequently serve the needs of employers rather than workers and, as such, should not be regarded as a gain for workers.

The nature of trades union involvement in supporting and/or delivering workplace basic skills or literacy programmes suggests the need for a re-evaluation of two

separate issues. The first is that of access to training opportunities for those classes of workers typically excluded from employment-based skills training. The second relates to the needs of workers for whom literacy difficulties or lack of facility with the language of the workplace may either threaten employment security or present obstacles to mobility in internal labour markets or to the takeup of training opportunities. In many (and perhaps most) cases, the issues of access to training opportunities and literacy/language difficulties are not significantly related. It cannot be assumed that either literacy or language difficulties affect workers' competence to do their jobs; undereducated and limited English proficiency workers are seldom hired without the employer's knowledge and the jobs they occupy are generally organized to minimize or eliminate the need for either literacy or language. Employment-based training for work which entails little or no reading or writing is also unlikely to require significant exercise of literacy competencies. Indeed, as the evidence presented in this thesis suggests, the assumption that any degree of educational/literacy/language deficit is necessarily reflected in diminished ability to perform at work or in training programmes has been one of the central misrepresentations of proponents of workplace literacy programmes.

If the motivation for trades union involvement in workplace basic skills and literacy programmes is to secure greater equality of access to training opportunities for all classes of workers, then there are obvious difficulties with the way in which the objective has been pursued. Promoting training on the basis of worker deficit—as such programmes are typically promoted—can do little to advance the position of marginalized workers either in their workplaces or in external labour markets. If the

objective of equal access to training were to be pursued meaningfully, it would first be necessary to determine what types of training would actually advantage the workers in question; it would then be necessary to plan for the delivery of training in a manner which would optimize the benefits which might accrue to participating workers. It is clear that the 'deficit' approach to training opportunities which has characterized the promotion of literacy/basic skills programmes has little possibility of positively affecting workers' earnings, promotion prospects or job security—except insofar as they function as selection sites and result in such gains for a select few. Since the majority of such programmes are premised on the assumption that workers are not fully competent to perform the jobs they are now in, it would seem the best they could offer workers would be the hope of keeping their current jobs and maintaining their present benefits. But, since in many cases expectations about what such programmes can achieve are unrealistically high and workers are apt to be assessed on the basis of the expectations (as measured by standardized tests or workplace performance) rather than on the actual programme content, it is arguably just as likely that participation may actually jeopardize job security.

If a union's assessment of workers' training needs or aspirations indicates interest in (or need for) either basic education or language training, provision for such training would be best achieved through negotiating for paid educational leave. Since the admission of basic educational need generally presents the possibility of employer punitive action, workers would be well advised not to reveal such need at the workplace; and unions would best serve their membership by negotiating a general entitlement to paid leave to attend any formal educational or training programme of the

worker's choice. There are models of such negotiated leave, where the focus is on entitlement rather than deficit, and where a degree of confidentiality is assured. Perhaps the most extensive paid educational leave for participation in basic education, as described in Chapter 7, is that negotiated by Italy's trades unions. Not only are workers given a paid leave entitlement to attend basic education programmes in the Italian model; an agreement with the public education system provides for those who take advantage of the leave to be served in the public system. Whether or not negotiated leave can be secured, unions would do well for their formally undereducated members (and for workers in general) if they were to take an active role in ensuring that public systems of education continue to offer high quality general educational upgrading opportunities for adults.

It has been argued here that the position taken by both organized labour and adult educationalists in the promotion of workplace basic education and literacy programmes does not generally advance the interests of workers in need of either literacy or language tuition and may, in many cases, expose them to a real threat of job loss. Neither does the position taken by either group advance the position of workers in general, since it undermines a 'public interest' function for education and training and promotes the idea that education and training should be organized in the employer's rather than the worker's interest. A re-evaluation of the issues of equality of access to training opportunities for workers and general access to educational upgrading opportunities needs to recognize that, while all workers may benefit from a range of training opportunities, training which is negotiated on the basis of worker deficit is unlikely to advantage the worker either in the workplace or the labour market. In particular, the

characterization of workers (in the workplace or the labour market) as 'illiterate' ought to be countered by both organized labour and educationalists. For not only is it, by and large, a misrepresentation; it also sets up a social category for which special (and unequal) treatment is seen to be appropriate.

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